WE'VE COME THIS FAR BY FAITH: CULTIVATING SPIRITUAL FORTITUDE IN YOUNG ADULTS

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A FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE DOCTORAL STUDIES COMMITTEE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Dayton, Ohio
May 2026

United Theological Seminary
Dayton, OH

Faculty Approval Page
Doctor of Ministry Final Project

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ABSTRACT

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This project was conducted at Mt. Ararat Baptist Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Young adults often face challenges that leave them feeling discouraged or disconnected from their faith. If young adults are exposed to practical skills for cultivating spiritual fortitude, then they can normalize adversity and utilize proper theological framework for understanding trials, thereby minimizing its negative impact on their faith. The duration of this project was six weeks. Research methodology included the Spiritual Fortitude Scale as a pre- and post-test, guided journal prompts, individual interviews, and group discussions. Project participants learned strategies for using their faith to face life's challenges.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am loved, encouraged, and strengthened by a mighty network of friends and family. They are my village and I am grateful for their unwavering support. I am especially grateful for my mom (Maria) and daughters (Jordan and Cameron) who were in the trenches with me and made it possible for me to complete this journey. Thank you for all the ways that you show up for me. To Ms. Breela, Ms. Dawkins, and Brother Lloyd: Our conversations birthed this project. Thank you for being a divine inspiration for my ministerial project. And finally, to my Watson Curtis Cohort family, thank you for accepting me as I am and creating safe spaces for me to grow into my calling. We are forever family, and for that, I am blessed.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the three men who have always encouraged and endorsed my ministerial journey: the late Rev. Dr. Jason A. Barr, my childhood pastor, who first acknowledged God's call on my life; Rev. Dr. Kent O. Johnson, my father, who has continually encouraged and supported my ministerial education; and Rev. Dr. William H. Curtis, my pastor, mentor, and one of my biggest supporters who continually invites me to rise to God's call.

INTRODUCTION

With the plethora of challenges facing today's Christians, Spiritual Fortitude—that stubborn determination to remain anchored in faith despite life's harshest trials—has become an essential component of Christian discipleship. When believers confront devastating personal losses, systemic injustice, or profound disappointment, this resilient faith enables them to trust God's heart even when His actions (or lack thereof) are challenging to understand. Since emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, our nation has seen an increased number of individuals grappling with their mental and emotional health. The disruption of daily routines, the loss of friends and family, and the extended isolation were extremely unsettling, and studies have confirmed that a significant portion of our population has struggled to recover.

Thankfully, God cares about our overall well-being, including our emotional health. As such, God's church remains the ideal place to cultivate spiritual fortitude by enhancing faith-building skills and creating soul-affirming connections with God and God's people. Establishing safe spaces for honest dialogue and lament, while allowing believers to openly wrestle with the paradoxes and unknowns of faith, is vital for cultivating spiritual fortitude not only in members but also with those seeking connection and community. As writer Joni Sancken rightly argues: "When wounded members

experience care and healing, the witness of the whole church is stronger."[1] As such, churches and the faith community can serve as invaluable sources of support for individuals navigating difficult times. Furthermore, the strength to endure can be fostered when Christians remain connected to their social support systems and their faith community.

With that in mind, this project, "We've Come This Far By Faith: Cultivating Spiritual Fortitude in Young Adults," was created. Cultivating spiritual fortitude in young adults enables them to resist the urge to abandon their faith when life gets hard. How we interpret our experiences, especially when faced with difficulties and challenges, creates a belief system that often defines our behavior and responses to life's circumstances. These beliefs are typically deeply rooted in our psyche and can either serve us well or negatively impact our quality of life. Spiritual fortitude transcends personal focus and shifts the Believer's attention toward a divine perspective. Thus, introducing spiritual fortitude to young adults can act as a protective factor against discouragement when they encounter unexpected challenges.

Chapter Two presents James 1:2-4 as the biblical foundation for this project. Although the challenges of life are often unwelcome and difficult, they can serve as opportunities for spiritual growth and maturity when viewed through the lens of faith, as described in James' epistle. James' letter to the early church reframes trials as opportunities for spiritual maturation rather than mere suffering. This project uses James' declaration to consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds as the foundation for encouragement for young adults who may feel discouraged or frustrated

[1] Joni S. Sancken, *Words That Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 17.

by the obstacles and challenges they are encountering in their faith journey. James wants believers to use their faith to confront everything that threatens it. He correctly framed challenges not merely as obstacles, but as potential catalysts for spiritual development. Thus, "we've come this far by faith" is not just a catchy hymn but also the rallying cry of a people who understand that their faith has not only grounded them but also guided them through the tumultuous days of their existence.

Chapter Three explores the significant role and contributions of the Black Church in the survival of African Americans in this country. While the concept of spiritual fortitude is presented as a new idea in the literature, I argue that the tenets of fortitude, perseverance, and resilience have been an integral part of Black Church culture since its inception.

In Chapter Four, Theodicy and the Theology of Suffering are discussed as the theological foundation for embracing challenges and adversity as a necessary part of the Christian journey. The power of our faith lies in our ability to use it as a guide and lens through which we interpret and filter information and experiences. This viewpoint undergirds this doctoral project and provides the normative mindset shared with the young adults who participated in the small group sessions. Thus, the goal of this project is to help young adults normalize adversity, enabling them to remain steadfast in their faith while seeking to navigate challenges effectively. The believer's hope lies in their conviction that what God allows—including adversity and trials—forms part of God's providence for our lives.

Chapter Five examines the psychological concept of resilience in relation to spiritual fortitude. While resilience refers to a person's ability to bounce back from

hardships, spiritual fortitude implies that individuals can endure and even thrive, regardless of their capacity to return to their previous way of being.

Chapter Six details the project design, methodology, implementation, and outcomes. The hypothesis that if young adults are taught practical skills for cultivating spiritual fortitude, then they will learn how to normalize adversity, thereby minimizing its negative impact on their faith, is marginally successful. Project observations, overall findings, and participant experiences are presented, along with reflections regarding future implications. Finally, considerations for future ministry opportunities with young adults are presented.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Introduction

"Christian spirituality, without an integration of emotional health, can be deadly - to yourself, your relationship with God, and the people around you."[1] These powerful words were written by author Peter Scazzero in his book *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality.* In the book, he provides his argument for why emotional health and wellness must be a part of our Christian discipleship. One reason he offers is that when we deny our pain, losses, and feelings year after year, we become less and less human. He suggests that this denial slowly transforms us into empty shells with smiley faces painted on them. Throughout the book, Scazzero chronicles how making the link between his emotional well-being and spiritual maturity transformed his faith journey, his marriage, and even his role as a pastor.[2]

I agree with Scazzero's assertion that our emotional health impacts how we see God, our ability to hear God's voice, and to discern His will. Moreover, I suggest that our emotional health influences how we interpret our experiences - especially when faced with difficulties and crisis. These interpretations create a belief system that often defines how we behave and respond to life's circumstances. These beliefs are often deeply rooted

[1] Peter Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 9.

[2] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 214.

in our psyche and can either serve us well or negatively impact our quality of life. Thus, I maintain that we must be intentional about using our faith to permeate every aspect of our identity and our life. Scazzero is right when he writes that the goal is to see God in every area of our life, not just the parts we deem spiritual.[3]

In the last few years of working with students and families, I have wanted to dig deeper with those who come to me for assistance. I have noticed that many are struggling with their emotions but only a few will openly mention their faith and how it impacts their view of their circumstances. Some have come to me because they know that I am a person of faith, and they ask me to pray for them or seek my perspective on a certain situation. This does not surprise me because when people (even those who consider themselves non-believers) are experiencing trouble and despair, they will often look to the faith-based community for direction, inspiration, comfort, and support. As a result, we have the unique opportunity to promote our faith and advocate for its effectiveness in addressing the concerns, anxieties, and burdens of those who seek our counsel.

While there are those who report drawing strength and comfort from their faith and spiritual practices, there are far too many that do not apply these principles to their emotional health. In recent years, multiple studies have found that large numbers of people are experiencing changes in their eating habits, having trouble sleeping and concentrating, and increasing their drug and alcohol use as ways to cope with the rising demands of life. Moreover, the number of people who openly admit to struggling with the increasing stressors of today's economic and racial climate continues to grow. Despite these pressures, The Pew Research Center reported a decline in the number of people

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[3] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 214.

who reported praying daily or even considering their religion as an important part of their lives.[4]

The COVID-19 global pandemic was a world-wide stressor that disrupted life as we knew it and created tremendous strain on individuals, families, and communities. One concerning result of the pandemic is the increased number of individuals that have wrestled with their mental health. These individuals reported struggling with the disruption to their daily routines, the loss of friends and families, and the extended time of isolation. These changes were extremely unsettling, and studies have confirmed that a significant portion of the population is having a hard time recovering. Likewise, youth and young adults greatly struggled with the pandemic restrictions and described feeling more anxious, depressed, and unsure of how to navigate their emotions during these unprecedented times. Tragically, some of these youth and young adults are choosing harmful and even lethal ways of addressing their pain. It is well documented that the pandemic restrictions of physical and social isolation contributed to decreased mental health outcomes across a wide variety of demographics. Hospitals and doctors recorded an increased number of individuals (particularly youth) that wrestled with their mental health. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported that in 2020 there was a 31% increase in emergency department visits for suspected suicide attempts among teens.[5]

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[4] Stephanie Kramer, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America," Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/.

[5] CDC, "Emergency Department Visits for Suspected Suicide Attempts Among Persons Aged 12-25 years Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic," Center for Disease Control and Prevention, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7024el.htm?s_cid=mm7024el_w.

The pandemic regulations not only created distance and isolation among people, but also caused some to feel distant from God as well. It was largely reported that youth and young adults experienced high levels of anxiety as their normal routines were dismantled by the pandemic. In their work on spiritual care, Counted and Miller suggest that separation anxiety can occur when God is perceived to be distant or not answering prayers. They argue that separation anxiety leads some to search for new attachments and maintain that the church and its leaders are perfectly positioned to support these individuals by creating relationships and opportunities that promote connection and foster spiritual growth.[6]

Creating these connections is crucial because the Pew Research Center reports that in America most religious change occurs during the tumultuous period of teenage years and young adulthood (fifteen to twenty-nine years old). The growing pains and agitation experienced during this time has caused many young Christians to abandon their religious upbringing.[7] Their perception that God is insensitive, unaware, or not concerned with their plight creates emotional distress and causes some to lose faith altogether. I contend that if these young people had the opportunity to openly share their frustrations with trusted members of the faith community, they would have the chance to reframe these perceptions and transform their relationship with God.

In the African American community many have been silent about their emotional and mental struggles due to fear, ignorance, and a perceived stigma. For African

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[6] Victor Counted and Joe R. Miller, "Pastoral Juxtaposition in Spiritual Care: Towards A Caregiving Faith Theology In An Evangelical Context," *HTS: Theological Studies* 74, no. 2 (2018): 1, https://doi:10.4102/hts.v74i2.4630.

[7] Stephanie Kramer, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America," Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america/.

American Christians in particular, the fear of being seen as lacking faith keeps them from admitting any emotional or mental battles. Openly discussing emotional and mental health removes these barriers and frees others to break their silence and speak out about their struggles. These conversations can ultimately create a strong, healthy, and compassionate community that supports the total person. Harold Koenig argues that people welcome spiritual conversations when they are suffering and attempting to make sense of their pain.[8] Thus, how we, as faith leaders, respond matters. When we reply to those who come to us with loving kindness and care, we can soothe anxieties and worries and help facilitate an atmosphere where faith can be acknowledged, renewed, and matured.

Current culture supports the compartmentalization of our lives, which cultivates the belief that our faith is private and not relevant to our daily emotional health. I believe that there are Christians who are experiencing what I call emotionally disconnected spirituality, where they are participating in spiritual disciplines, yet not using their faith to combat their feelings of anger, sadness, anxiety, or despair. As Christians, we are tasked with the daily work of feeding our faith and creating habits that nurture our relationship with God. Moreover, we also must remove and root out the narratives that leave us feeling empty and disconnected from God and each other.

While others may be bewildered and intimidated by what we feel, God can handle the full weight of our emotions. Many of us were told not to question God, but I agree with Dr. Alicia Britt Chole's assertion that we weaken, not strengthen, our faith when we silence sincere questions. It is my belief that our engagement and wrestling with our faith

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[8] Harold Koenig, *Faith and Mental Health* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2005), 343.

is just as, and maybe even more, important than weekly worship attendance. In my estimation, the struggle and seeking fosters intimacy and deepens our faith. The power of our faith is in the ability to use it as a guide and resource to filter information and use it to help us understand our experiences and make sense of our world. Our faith can be a source of comfort as we seek to answer life's questions and gain perspective on the peaks and valleys of our journey. In fact, researchers have found a positive relationship between those who identified having an active faith relationship and lower levels of depression, stress, and anxiety.

Through my ministry project, I hope to give Christian's permission and a safe space to admit the full range of their emotions and to cultivate spiritual fortitude. It is my belief that sifting our experiences and emotions through the lens of faith and our relationship with Christ is how we nurture an emotionally healthy spirituality. Scazzero was right when he wrote that our discipleship towards becoming emotionally mature Christians should include learning "how to apply practically and effectively the truths we believe."[9]

Context

Over the past several decades, the internet and social media has changed our context and expanded our world. Thanks to the information highway, we have access to news and other material at lightning speed. While this is generally seen as positive, it also requires that we sift through, interpret, and even fact-check all the images and information coming our way. In addition, social media has provided ways for us to

[9] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality,* 167.

"connect" with people across the globe, including those we never intend to meet. While these technological advances have enhanced many aspects of our society, some disturbing trends have emerged. Now that information is more easily accessible, studies have shown an increasing number of people that are willing to look at more than one source (religious or otherwise) to address their spiritual needs.[10] Similarly, individuals seeking connection to a church now have a vast number of in-person and virtual options and are often making their choice based on the relevance of the worship and programming.[11] With this trend in mind, Mount Ararat Baptist Church is tasked with not only ministering to the congregation that physically enters its sanctuary, but also creating ways to connect and care for virtual members who may never visit Pittsburgh. This is a pivotal, yet exciting time that will require the church and its leadership to think outside of the box as we seek to grow and enhance our ministry.

While the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for churches worldwide, there were a few positive trends that emerged. The restrictions on mass gatherings meant that most people used the internet and social media to virtually access not only their home church, but also ministries from all over the world. Mount Ararat Baptist Church identifies itself as "The Ministry That Cares" and aspires to be a place where you can come to worship and find refuge when you are feeling burdened and overwhelmed by life. Throughout the pandemic, Mount Ararat continued its outreach as the "Ministry That Cares" by providing resources not only to its congregation, but also to the local and even

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[10] Nancy L. Eiseland, and Warner, R. Stephen, "Ecology: Seeing the Congregation in Context," in *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook,* eds. Nancy T. Ammerman, Jackson W. Carroll, Carl S. Dudley, and William McKinney (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 42.

[11] Eiseland and Warner, "Ecology," 72.

national community. Due to the forward thinking of Pastor William H. Curtis, Mount Ararat was able to immediately switch to a virtual platform and stream its worship services via multiple platforms. This allowed for the membership to remain connected despite the closing of the physical sanctuary. It also introduced Mount Ararat to many people who may not have otherwise participated in weekly worship services.

Much like the rest of the world, those connected to Mount Ararat were not immune to the stressors of the COVID-19 pandemic, police violence, economic pressures, stressful work conditions, social isolation, and racial unrest. The disruption to routines, ceasing of daily activities, the loss of friends and families, and the extended time of isolation were unsettling for the congregation; and many have acknowledged the difficulties they have faced as they are recovering and creating their new normal. The youth also struggled with the pandemic restrictions and have described feeling anxious, depressed, and unsure of how to navigate their emotions.

Prior to the pandemic, Mount Ararat had a robust youth ministry full of activities that catered to our youth. Children's Church and Youth Sunday School were held weekly and had a core group of youth that regularly attended. In addition to those services, members in high school had the opportunity to learn job skills and earn scholarship money while they worked in the Youth Cafe. Unfortunately, the pandemic forced the closure of the cafe and youth programming shifted to a virtual platform. This created a challenge for the Youth Ministry as they quickly learned that the young members were tired of connecting virtually. As a result, the number of regular youth participants dropped as the restrictions of the pandemic lingered on. Recently, the youth ministry returned to in person services but also offers a hybrid experience to connect with as many

youth as possible. Similarly, more concentrated efforts are being made to reach young adult members and create ministry opportunities for them to fellowship together.

As Mt. Ararat emerged from the pandemic restrictions, Pastor Curtis held focus groups with the youth to check-in with them, and to ask what they needed from the church as they transitioned back to in person ministry. What he learned is that many of the youth were struggling with feelings of anxiety, depression, and a general sense of uneasiness about life post-COVID. After identifying the needs of our youth, Pastor Curtis has turned his focus to our young adult population. As a result of his initial conversations with members aged eighteen to forty, he now conducts monthly young adult Bible study sessions centered on topics that are relevant to their lives. This is a strategic effort to acknowledge and support these members as they navigate the unique challenges of their life cycle in a post-pandemic world. As we begin to craft ministry initiatives that address our post pandemic reality, I believe it is imperative that we continue the message that God cares about how we feel and that we can use our faith to help us form a healthy spirituality that addresses our whole being.

As a school social worker, I have encountered many youth and young adults that have rejected suggestions of counseling and instead report daily use of social media, talking to friends, sex, and even recreational drug use as preferred coping methods. Sadly, these individuals rarely mention their faith as a source of comfort or support when dealing with their mental and emotional needs. If faith was considered at all, it was usually seen as one of many perspectives and voices competing for their attention and time. Furthermore, only a few of them acknowledged having a home church or being

closely connected to anyone of faith. This creates an opportunity for connection as the church begins to create ministry for this population.

One challenge the church will need to address is the increasing popularity of the belief that faith, or lack thereof, is a private matter that should be separate from the rest of life. As we begin to craft ministry for post pandemic life, it is imperative that the church counter the culture's narrative that faith is a private matter that is isolated from other areas of one's life. It is my assertion that we experience the true power of our faith when we allow it to permeate and saturate all areas of our lives. God cares about our total being, including our mental health. We can and should trust God with all our emotions, not just the good ones.

As the Ministry that Cares, it is important that we are a compassionate congregation that supports our members who are struggling mentally and emotionally. There are many ways to achieve this goal including using our media platforms, sermons, and small group curriculum to educate members on emotional and mental wellness. We can also provide resources during Mental Health Awareness Month in May and Mental Illness Awareness Week in October. Creating platforms and conversations around spiritual fortitude should be an easy progression for Mt. Ararat, as historically the Black Church is deeply rooted in this type of weekly dialogue between pastor and people.

Ministry Journey

In my young life, I struggled with the idea that God loved me because I lived with the deep hurt and pain of being sexually abused. I did not understand how a loving God would allow a child to endure such physical and emotional pain. I would hear in

church that God knows all and sees all, yet I often wondered why He never sent help my way. By the time I reached my mid-twenties, I felt God's invitation to ministry, but I believed that I was too messed up to respond to His call. More recently, I was afraid that my past, my divorce, or even my age was a hindrance for me to do ministry. Writing my spiritual autobiography helped me to see that the highs and lows, the good and the bad experiences, and all my missteps have perfectly equipped me for this moment in my journey. My emotions and traumatic experiences had created negative narratives and powerful scripts that I was allowing to unconsciously direct my life. Thankfully, God used my faith to rewrite these scripts and gradually transform my way of thinking.

From the time I was a teenager, family, and friends frequently sought my advice and I became acutely aware that what I said mattered to people. While I was briefly annoyed by this, I eventually decided to lean into it and make it part of my life's work. The only problem was that God was calling me to ministry, but I was fearful and instead chose to pursue social work.

In 2001, I graduated with a Master of Social Work degree and began working in that field. I held two brief jobs: first with a mental health outpatient facility and then with my church's nonprofit organization. In 2003, I began working in a local school district and have been engaged in school social work ever since. In my role as a school social worker, I have been able to have daily interactions with children and adults, which has sharpened my listening skills, interview techniques, and conflict resolution style. More times than not, I find my interactions at work to be extremely fulfilling. However, there are times when I become frustrated that I am not permitted to incorporate spiritual principles into the conversation. A few times I have utilized the stages of Kenneth

Pohly's Supervisory Conversation and found it extremely helpful in assisting others to gain a godly perspective of their circumstances.[12]

As a social worker, I have learned how to talk to people so that they want to listen to what I have to say. I also learned when to be silent and just listen to what is being said to me. I have also grown comfortable in advocating for those who are unable to do so for themselves. I honestly thought that I would work in this role until retirement, but I began to feel a restless shift in 2018. So, I reached out to my pastor to discuss my discontent. I explained to him that I felt like I worked in a war zone; and I wondered if what I was doing even mattered. I was praying each morning that I could encourage or motivate a student to be their best self but more and more I felt like I was losing my most vulnerable students to poor decision-making and the streets. I conveyed my belief that I was there to help students, families, and school personnel process their trauma and grief, but I lamented that it was becoming an increasingly harder task for me to endure. I confided that I felt there was more that I should be doing but that I was also drained by all that I was already involved in. When I finished talking, my pastor spoke words to me that resonate in my mind to this very day. "You are called to ministry, and you know it, but you refuse to surrender to it." Those words, "refuse to surrender," felt so harsh but I knew that he was right. I had not considered my actions in that light, and it really hit home when he said it so bluntly. My pastor ended that conversation by asking me to say yes to God, go to seminary, and to trust him. Since January 2019 that is exactly what I have been doing, and what I have discovered is that God has graciously used my detour (into social work) for the good of ministry.

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[12] Kenneth Pohly, *Transforming the Rough Places* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 118-119.

For most of my life, I was focused on my external presentation to others and had all but ignored the internal (i.e. emotional) turmoil that I was experiencing. Quite honestly, there was a sense of embarrassment and shame, as well as a lack of awareness for how the turmoil was impacting my spiritual life. I knew that I was an emotional mess, but I was determined to keep that reality a secret from those around me. So, I focused on being a good child, good friend, good worker, and good Christian. All the while, I was struggling with low self-esteem, doubts, frustrations, nagging questions, and deep hurts that I not only kept from those around me, but tried to hide from God too.

In his book, Scazzero uses an iceberg illustration to describe how we present ourselves to the world. The tip of the iceberg is generally what people see and is usually a very small portion of the iceberg. The majority of the structure lies beneath the surface and is not easily seen. Many of us are only concerned with the tip of the iceberg: what can be seen and how we present ourselves to the world. However, I believe that God is concerned with our entire being and maybe even more so with the parts that we try to keep hidden.

I believe that many Christians can relate to this struggle and are masking their pain, shame, loneliness, anger, grief and other deep emotional wounds. Sadly, the pandemic has only magnified these hardships and created a larger breeding ground for this hidden sadness. I am convinced that church membership and spiritual busyness alone is not enough. We must also surrender our emotions, our thoughts, and our hearts to the Lordship of Christ. In my life, I tried to remain busy to escape my deeply seeded sadness.

Scazzero argues that this busyness and even some of our spiritual activities can be detrimental when we use them as an "unconscious attempt to escape pain."[13]

Just like Scazzero acknowledged that he ignored the "glaring signs of his emotional immaturity" because of the spiritual growth he was experiencing in other areas of his life,[14] I now realize that I spent several years growing spiritually while being emotionally crippled. During this time in my young adult life, I mentally separated my depression and anger with God from my spiritual activity. In fact, I was attending church and Bible study more than I had ever done in my life, yet my depression lingered and (at times) intensified. I wrestled with these two realities for several years without making the connection between my mental health and spiritual well-being. I truly cannot recall when it happened, but slowly I began to realize and embrace that God cared about every aspect of my life. This meant that there was nothing I was thinking or feeling that was not important to Him. I slowly began to use my prayer and devotion time as full disclosure moments with God. I laid it all before the Lord and was vulnerable and brutally honest about my frustrations with my faith. This process was cleansing for me and created an authentic connection with my faith which I desperately need during my grieving process following the death of my favorite aunt. For more than a year, I poured out my heart to God acknowledging my love for Him but also expressing my anger and resentment. From those moments of full transparency and vulnerability, I gained the realization that God can truly handle all of it. He is not upset by my crying, cursing, and tantrums. Instead, a deeper connection with God was developed as I honestly shared my heartache with Him.

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[13] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality,* 22.

[14] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 17.

I have grown to understand that we cannot let our emotions dictate our faith, instead our faith must rule our emotions.

As a result of my new mindset regarding my emotions and my faith, I am gentler with myself and honest with God about my feelings. During the pandemic, I relied heavily on my faith to regulate my emotions as I balanced the demands of the Master of Ministry program, working virtually, and living in a household with a man that was consumed with anger over my decision to end our marriage. Many areas of my life were changing all at once which normally would have paralyzed me with fear and anxiety. However, this time I chose to lean into my faith and intentionally embraced this time of tension and mystery in my life.

In the fall of 2022, I decided to step out on faith and finally say yes to God. I was ready to honor God by letting my faith (and not my emotions) dictate my journey. Almost immediately, I sensed the invitation to "surrender my life to ministry." Within a month, I received a phone call inviting me to enroll in United Theological Seminary's Doctor of Ministry program (DMin). I knew that this was my opportunity to surrender to the call, so I accepted the invitation and enrolled in the doctoral program. I know that this part of my journey will require a daily resolve to trust and obey. When I have moments of uncertainty, I have repeated to myself a portion of scripture from Judges 6:14, Go in the strength you have…Am I not sending you? I also frequently recite the words of a dear friend: "Never underestimate what you can do, when you trust in the plans that have been declared for you!"

Now, I have a deeper appreciation for how each part of my story not only fashioned me, but shaped how I see myself, the world, and even how I see God. I am

grateful that God has been gracious to me and allowed me to slowly move towards the sweet spot of fully embracing who I am and who He called me to be. I realize and accept that God wants to use every part of my story for His glory. As a result, I encourage those in my sphere of influence to leave space for alternative interpretations of their experiences and I challenge myself to do the same.

The Synergy

It has been written that human trials are a universal experience. If you live long enough you will encounter a season of loss, hardships, or some other unexpected circumstance. Christians are not exempt from this reality, yet many of them have asked during tough times: God why are you allowing me to suffer like this? This is indeed a heart wrenching and difficult question for God's people, as we tackle the current tensions of our time: increasing racial conflict, global pandemic, war, suffering, and death. While some have used their faith to find comfort and meaning, others have reported feelings of isolation, depression, and hopelessness. Indeed, difficult times can test what we know and believe about God. This distress has led to a search for meaning and a way to make sense of the current realities. These intersections in life when we experience a gap between our beliefs and our experiences can create critical moments that reveal cracks in our spiritual foundation or opportunities that can root us deeper in our faith. Scazzero argues that fully embracing God's love enables us to surrender to His will, especially when it is contrary to what we can see, feel, or figure out for ourselves.[15] For African Americans, the Black Church and our faith have been a bedrock in our community and a powerful source of

[15] Scazzero, *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*, 50.

support and affirmation. As a people, we have had to use spiritual fortitude to weather centuries of slavery, racism, and discrimination. The church and its leaders have promoted messages of positive self-regard, healing, and resilience in the face of adversity for generations.[16]

Prior to the Enlightenment Period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an individual's mental and emotional well-being were deemed religious matters and were handled by the faith community. The growing popularity of modern science caused a shift away from the church towards medical explanations. Over the centuries this has created a tension between the pew and the couch, where many believe you either seek help from a therapist or just rely on your faith. There is rarely room for both. More recently, there seems to be a change of attitude and growing openness towards the use of spiritual practices to enhance one's mental and emotional wellbeing.

As a social worker, I have seen firsthand how people can struggle to make sense of how they are feeling and what they are experiencing. While many will lean on what they were taught by their family or even prior life experiences to help them understand their context, some Christians wrestle with their faith and even wonder why God has allowed certain things to happen at all.

I confess and readily admit that as human beings we will not understand everything that happens to us, nor can we expect our faith leaders to have all the answers. While that reality may be hard for some to accept, the truth is that we can still point those in our care to our Heavenly Father. God understands all our emotions, including the

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[16] Susan Scribner et al, "Bridges to Care and Recovery: Addressing Behavioral Health and Mental Health Needs Through the Faith Community," *Journal of Religion and Health* 59, no. 4 (2020): 1947, https://doi:10.1007/s10943-020-00992-y.

tough ones that we wrestle with such as grief, despair, anger, anxiety, and depression. He can handle our questions and longs to walk with us through these challenging times. God does not leave us in the dark and devastating moments of our life. Though we may feel alone during certain parts of our journey, we can take comfort in the fact that we are never alone. As such, I contend that cultivating spiritual fortitude is the emotionally healthy response to managing the vicissitudes of life.

Spiritual fortitude is a relatively new construct that seeks to provide habitual ways for spiritual resources to be used to cope with stress and adversity.[17] The three components of spiritual fortitude include spiritual endurance, spiritual enterprise, and redemptive purpose.[18] Van Tongeren et al. defines spiritual endurance as the ability to draw on religious or spiritual resources to withstand suffering for an extended period. Spiritual enterprise is described as the ability to live up to one's moral standard and live with integrity in the face of difficulty. Lastly, redemptive purpose is the confidence that one renews their sense of meaning and purpose for life through adversity. Research has positively linked spiritual fortitude with better mental health, including lower levels of anxiety and depression. One of the goals of spiritual fortitude is to help people reconnect with or establish tools of faith that provide comfort and support. Spiritual fortitude is about more than grit, resilience, or bouncing back; instead, it involves digging deep into the spiritual realm to endure life's trials.

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[17] Hansong Zhang et al., "Spiritual Fortitude: A Systematic Review of the Literature and Implications for COVID-19 Coping," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 8, no. 4 (2021): 231, https://doi:10.1037/scp0000267.

[18] Zhang et al., "Spiritual Fortitude," 231.

While the world might suggest that leaning on your faith is but one way to live your life, I argue that our faith is the strongest measure that we can use to evaluate our thinking and our behavior. Cultivating this faith and spiritual fortitude can be invaluable when life becomes complicated and painful. My desire is for spiritual fortitude to become an embedded response when the storms of life start raging. In our humanity, there are times that we struggle to understand or interpret why life unfolds the way that it does. As much as it may not be possible to change the circumstances of a situation, it is possible to provide support and encouragement to those who are enduring hardships. Hence, I agree with Wanak's position that:

> God often breaks into our lives in the form of godly people. This is more than a 'knowing about,' it is the Spirit of God revealing Himself through people. Each one of us, individually and corporately, is a curriculum, a course that reveals something of the nature of God; yes, mediated by frail humanity, but also empowered by the Spirit.[19]

Ultimately, my goal is to help those who are struggling to feel less alone and to help them evaluate their experiences using their faith.

My doctoral project utilized a six-week small group setting. This format fostered an intimate environment for meaningful conversations centered on cultivating spiritual fortitude. Unlike seminars where a large group gathers to hear from a presenter, the small group format provided a smaller setting for more personal conversations. The concept of intimate talks for theological purposes is not new. In fact, in the 1500s, a collection of Table Talk conversations between Martin Luther and his colleagues was published. I believe that this format can create an opportunity for more meaningful, transparent, and honest conversations to occur. The purpose of every session was to promote practical

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[19] L. Wanak, "Learning As the Experience of God," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 28, no. 1 (2004): 59.

skills that could be accessed when facing trials and adversity. Another goal of the project was to provide resources and faith tools that can assist in understanding, evaluating, and even shifting the narrative regarding difficult experiences and circumstances. My desire for this project was to create a safe space for curiosity, honest dialogue, and empathy. Cultivating spiritual fortitude can help normalize the experience of hardships and struggles; reshape and expand perspectives on suffering; and provide encouragement and helpful resources for enduring well. “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

Abstract

Mount Ararat Baptist Church is in the Larimer neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In July 2021, the church resumed in-person worship services and gradually returned to in-person ministry opportunities. As such, leadership also looked for ways to support the membership and community as we embraced our new normal.

The problem statement is that young adults are often faced with challenges and trials that can leave them feeling discouraged or disconnected from their faith. How we feel and - more importantly - how we process our feelings is a discipleship issue. The challenges of life and the difficulties that we face can create negative thoughts and emotions about us, our faith, and God. These emotions can impact our behavior and cause a disconnect (or crisis) with our faith that leads us to misinterpret our experiences. Left unchecked, the negativity can create a poor self-image, estrangement from the community of faith, or an all-out abandonment of faith.

The hypothesis statement is if young adults are exposed to practical skills for cultivating spiritual fortitude, then they can normalize adversity and utilize proper theological framework for understanding trials, thereby minimizing its negative impact on their faith. Spiritual fortitude empowers individuals with a strength of spirit that enables them to endure trials and interpret their adversity with resolve and faith in God.

This project included group discussions, weekly journal prompt, participant interviews, and a panel group discussion. The intended outcome was to empower participants to more confidently draw upon their spiritual resources when interpreting challenges and enduring the natural peaks and valleys of life.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Introduction

"My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing" (Jas. 1:2-4). Adversity in life is the common thread woven through all human stories. A life fully lived inevitably endures unexpected circumstances or encounters a season of loss or hardships. At some point in life, you will get bad news. You will experience frustrations, hard times, and even heartache. It is the inevitable cycle of life. This reality is true for Christians as well, yet many have asked God why challenges have come their way. Navigating hardships can be difficult even for God's people. How we interpret and handle adversity and challenges have a significant impact on our mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

The good news is that our lives are not some random series of events. While life may seem unfair at times, we can take comfort in the faithful character of God. We can also be encouraged that God is at work in every detail of our life. All the good times and even what we consider to be bad times are subject to God's authority and sovereignty. In everything, God works for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). While this does

not mean that every day of our lives will be easy it does mean that through it all we can cling to God's love for us.

While it is true that the difficulties of life cannot be avoided, God's people can find hope and encouragement in scripture. James' letter was written to encourage Christians to respond to adversity with confidence in God's providence and a determination to remain faithful. He wants believers to remain steadfast during difficult times because of the assurance that trials may test our faith, but it also produces endurance and spiritual maturity. For James, our actions, behaviors, and works are the manifestation of our faith and an acknowledgement of our relationship with God. Mariam Kovalishyn suggests that James grounds his letter in God's character and provides "practical advice" for his readers so that they can endure their challenging circumstances. Additionally, she considers the letter a source of support for a community that needed instructions on how to manage living as a minority community in challenging circumstances.[1]

Difficult times can test what we know and believe about God. However, James encourages Christians to endure these seasons with joy because we are assured that there is a purpose to everything we experience, including difficulties and trials. Douglas Moo writes that James' letter offers his "conviction that the suffering of believers is always under the providential control of a God who wants only the best for his people."[2] As

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[1] Mariam K. Kovalishyn, "Salvation in James: Saved by Gift to Become Merciful," in *Reading the Epistle of James: A Resource for Students*, eds. Eric F. Mason and Darian R. Lockett (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2019), 136.

[2] Moo Douglas, *James: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 16 (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press UK, 2015), 26.

such, James' letter provides ethical instruction and wisdom that he deems necessary for his readers to persevere and endure.

While there has been much debate among Bible scholars regarding who authored the Epistle, there are several aspects of James' letter that most Bible scholars agree on. For example, many biblical commentators agree that James' Epistle reflects and draws upon Jewish wisdom traditions. Howard Basser notes that while the text is offered as a letter, some choose to read the Epistle as an "ethical discourse" or piece of wisdom literature (like Proverbs or Sirach).[3] Bible scholars also have complementary opinions on the purpose of James' Epistle. Mark Allan Powell notes that the purpose of the letter is "to offer evangelical counsel and pastoral exhortation to believers who might be tempted to compromise their faith through devotion to the world."[4] David DeSilva views James' purpose for writing the Epistle as promoting the disciples' integrity by advocating a walk that falls in line with the believers' convictions and beliefs. He argues that James presents "Christian wisdom" that is framed by the addition of Jesus as the ultimate teacher of wisdom.[5] Finally, Mariam Kovalishyn contends the letter provided vision and coherent insight on the life that Christians were being called to live.

The central theme of James' letter is to offer Christianity as more than a system of beliefs. Instead, he advocates for a lifestyle that requires consistency and fidelity between

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[3] Herbert Basser, "The Letter of James," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 489.

[4] Mark A. Powell, "James," in *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 439.

[5] David DeSilna, "The Epistle of James: Promoting Consistency of Belief and Behavior," in *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 728.

beliefs and behaviors. In the first chapter of the letter James instructs readers to "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves" (Jas. 1:22). He considers anything less to be foolish. *The Message Bible* interprets James' words this way:

> Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like (Jas. 1:22-24).

James addresses other tenets of Christian living in the letter, including emphasizing the importance of self-discipline as well as warning against favoring the wealthy. He also stresses the power of prayer and the need for repentance as preparation for the final judgment.[6] Finally, James' letter promotes a faith that is unwavering and recommends that believers maintain a consistent commitment and trust in God. It is apparent that James desires for his readers to use their knowledge about God as the motivator for their actions. His perspective is that the church's witness is strengthened when their message about the gospel is consistent with the members' individual and collective lifestyle. Kovalishyn writes that "James assumes that anyone who truly encounters the word will begin to live accordingly, as a seamless outcome of the new birth into life as God's people."[7]

This Biblical Foundation chapter explores the authorship of the Epistle, its reception by the church, and the major themes presented. The final portion of the chapter

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[6] Bassere, "The Letter of James," 489.

[7] Mariam K. Kovalishyn, "Salvation in James: Saved by Gift to Become Merciful," in *Reading the Epistle of James: A Resource for Students*, eds. Eric F. Mason and Darian R. Lockett (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2019), 136.

uses the focal text as the biblical foundation for developing spiritual fortitude which is essential to Christian discipleship and properly interpreting the vicissitudes of life.

Exegesis

Authorship

There are multiple individuals named James (five to seven, depending on the scholar consulted) mentioned in the New Testament, which has created much debate among Bible scholars regarding the true author. Most theologians associate the letter with James the Just, the brother of Jesus who became a leader of the early church in Jerusalem. Others believe that this James cannot be the author due to the sophistication of the Greek used in the writing and thus suggest that it was either written in his name or was penned by another James (noting that it was a common name among first century Jews).[8] While the letter's author cannot be definitively confirmed, historical evidence suggests that it was written in the 60s or 70s CE.

Reception

Darian Lockett writes that there is "surprising silence" concerning the early church's use of the letter which has made it difficult to detail the early reception history of James. He also highlights the "lack of direct reference to or citation of the letter before

[8] Timothy B. Cargal, "James," in *Fortress Commentary on the Bible: The New Testament,* eds. Aymer, Margaret Kittredge, Cynthia Briggs, and David A. Sanchez (Lanham, MD: Fortress Press, 2014), 655.

the time of Origen."[9] This lack of direct citation has fueled the debate about whether the letter should be dated within the lifetime of James, the brother of Jesus or later (as late as 180 CE) making James a canon-conscious ghost-writer. Locket suggests that the strongest argument for the earlier authorship is that the letter has similar terminology (i.e. double-minded) and was alluded to or used by 1 Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas.[10]

In *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius (260-340 CE) writes that the Epistle lacked broad acceptance in the early centuries of the church. Nevertheless, he argued that James should be included in the canon because it shared an apostolic style, was orthodox in its teaching, and was recognized by many. For example, Origen referenced James frequently and deemed the Epistle to be an authoritative resource. During this same time scholars have discovered mentions of James being included in the collection of seven letters known as the Catholic Epistles. Ultimately, Origen's assessment of the Epistle as apostolic scripture helped it to gain acceptance in the East, which eventually led it to be confirmed as canon by the Council of Hippo (393 CE) and the Councils of Carthage (397,419 CE).[11]

While the Epistle was eventually included in the canon, critiques of the letter persisted. Most criticism included the perceived lack of structure, its minimal mention of Jesus, and even its lack of theology.[12] Martin Dibelius once suggested that James

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[9] Darian Lockett, "Use, Authority, and Canonical Status of James in the Earliest Church," in *Reading the Epistle of James*, eds. Eric F. Mason and Darian R. Lockett (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2019), 254.

[10] Lockett, "Use, Authority, and Canonical Status," 254.

[11] Carl Holladay, "James," in *Introduction to the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 736.

[12] Martin Dibelius, *James* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 1976), 21.

contained no real theology and was simply a string of pearls, a series of wisdom sayings, or paraeneses. Likewise, M. J. Evans believes that James' work should be viewed as a "practical letter" instead of a theological treatise.[13] Commentator Peter Davids emphasizes the letter's lack of "developed Trinitarian theology" and points to its minimal mention of Jesus and the failure to mention the Holy Spirit.[14] However, David notes that there are seventeen references to God and additional terms that refer to God which for him equates to an "expressed binitarian theology."[15] Similarly, David Gowler acknowledges that there are only two explicit references to Jesus (1:1 and 2:1), yet he suggests that "echoes of Jesus' words and teachings permeate the letter."[16]

While James' letter appears to function as an encouragement for its readers, in 1522, Martin Luther famously described it as an "epistle of straw." At that time, Luther desired to provide his instruction on how to interpret the New Testament and offered guidance to readers on the most essential New Testament books. One reason for Luther's discontent with the letter was his view that James was against Paul and all the rest of scripture by assigning justification to works, especially when discussing Abraham (2:21). In Luther's mind, an apostle would not have made that mistake. Another point of contention for Luther, was the minimal mention of Jesus, the lack of teaching regarding Jesus, and the failure to mention the Passion, the Resurrection, or the Spirit of Christ. In

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[13] M. J. Evans, "The Law in James," *Vox Evangelica* 13 (1983): 29-30.

[14] Peter H. Davids, "The Good God and the Reigning Lord: Theology of the Epistle of James," in *Reading the Epistle of James: A Resource for Students,* eds. Eric F. Mason and Darian R. Lockett (Society of Biblical Literature, 2019), 117.

[15] Davids, "The Good God and the Reigning Lord," 118.

[16] David Gowler, *James Through the Centuries* (Newark, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2013), 64.

his estimation, James' letter lacked the true nature of the gospel. As a result, Luther placed James at the end of the New Testament with Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation which were other books about which he had doubts. Luther's opponents did not agree with his assessment of James and often used his characterization as ammunition against him. Moreover, others have noted that Luther would frequently quote passages and preach text from the Epistle which suggests that while Luther did not hold James in the same regard as the gospels, he did find value in its instructions for believers.

In 1550, John Calvin had a more positive view of James and published a commentary that described James' letter as a rich source of varied instruction that was of great benefit to the Christian life. Calvin highlighted the opening words in James as one of the reasons that he admired the book and deemed it worthy to be included in the canon. He was not bothered by the Epistle's lack of Christology and urged readers not to expect the book to cover the same ground as other books of the canon.

More recently, scholars have looked at James with new eyes and provided more favorable assessments of the Epistle. The newer commentaries have allowed James to stand on its own merit and have brought appreciation for the contribution that James' exhortation has made to the early Christian community and beyond. For instance, commentator Ralph Martin argues that James' mind "moves from one exhortation to another and purposefully carries the readers along with him."[17]

[17] Ralph Martin, *James*, vol. 48 (Grand Rapids, MI: Harpers Collins Christian Publishing, 2015), 13.

Major Themes

James opens his letter with the issues and corresponding response for a community faced with suffering: trials (1:2-3), endurance (1:3-4), wisdom (1:5), and preserving faith (1:6-8).[18] Luke Johnson comments that the first chapter "functions within the larger letter to anticipate themes developed more fully" throughout the letter.[19] In Johnson's view the first chapter also emphasizes the need for the believer to have proper understanding and perception regarding their trials, namely that the world is an open system created and controlled by God. While God may not intervene or stop the daily struggles of creation, James wants his readers to understand that God is not an apathetic observer passively watching their daily hardships.

James' letter was written to an audience that was navigating hardships and putting their faith to the test. In response, he writes his Epistle to defend and nurture their faith and remind them that trials, suffering, and hardships are part of the faith journey. He understood how trials had the potential to threaten a believer's faith. Instead of letting their circumstances attack their faith, James wanted them to use their faith to attack everything that threatened it. To bolster his paraenesis, James references Abraham (2:21-4), Rahab (2:25), the prophets (5:10), and Job (5:11) as prime examples of faithfulness.

Dan McCartney notes that the first chapter of the letter details James' concern with the life of faith which he develops in more detail in subsequent chapters. He emphasizes James' particular interest in the "importance and indispensability of genuine

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[18] McCartney, *James*, 82.

[19] Luke Johnson, "Epitome of Exhortation 1:2-27," in the *Letter of James: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 175.

faith and unyielding conviction, and this interest runs right through the letter."[20] McCartney writes that James desires to address the disconnect between professed faith and a lifestyle of faith, noting that the letter described this type of faith as "dead."[21] For James, faith was more than just belief in God but also rooted in the actions of fidelity and commitment. In essence, believers must do more than just profess their faith, rather they must live their life reconciled and surrendered to God's will. Douglas Moo writes that James "urges his readers to adopt an attitude towards God that he views as crucial in the Christian life: a consistent and undivided commitment to God in Christ."[22]

Dan McCartney notes that James makes it clear that "actions and attitudes incompatible with faith must be attacked."[23] James understood that trials and pressures could cause believers to doubt the sovereignty of God. So, he highlights the character of God and desires for his audience to interpret their current experiences through a divine lens. James wants his readers to rest in the knowledge that their suffering is "always under the providential control of God."[24] Moreover, he encourages readers to be steadfast and emphasizes the message that God's character (i.e. goodness) could be relied on even during difficult times.

James draws heavily from the wisdom literature of Judaism and writes about the God of the Hebrew scriptures (YHWH) whom he often calls both God and Father. His

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[20] McCartney, *James*, 81.

[21] Dan McCartney, "Faith, Works, and Justification in James and Paul," in *James* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 273-274.

[22] Douglas Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary* (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity Press UK, 2015), 25.

[23] McCartney, *James*, 81.

[24] Moo, *James*, 26.

God is the only true God (YHWH) and is the leading divine figure of his paraenesis. James describes a good God. For him, to love God is to do His will. He advocates for an unwavering confidence in the goodness and character of God. This confidence in God undergirds the discipleship of the believer.

The meaning of suffering was often discussed in wisdom literature. Abraham and Joseph were often referenced as examples of how God used trials and affliction to teach wisdom. James wants his readers to face their trials with wisdom and argues that wisdom - in particular divine wisdom - is a gift from God. This wisdom is what allows believers to stand firm in the face of trials and testing. As such, James desires for his readers to focus on the finished work (maturity/perfection/wisdom) and not the process (trials and testing).

David Gowler notes that faith in God is the central message in James' letter and that James' seeks to offer Christianity as more than a system of beliefs. Instead, James views faith as a lifestyle that requires consistency and fidelity between beliefs and behaviors. W. Nichol suggests that James sees faith and works as separate but necessary elements that must cooperate in a believer's justification. Most importantly, James desires for his readers to use their knowledge about God as the motivator for their actions.

Focus Text

James wrote to the twelve tribes scattered throughout the Roman Empire. Most scholars believe the readers were either in the post-Pauline diaspora or in the first

century, prewar Northern Palestine/Syria.[25] The letter readers were most likely Jewish believers that found themselves alienated from the larger culture because of their commitment to the faith and could have begun to question whether this "testing of their faith" was worth their devotion to God. Theologians have highlighted the pastoral tone and the many exhortations of the letter. Robert Wall described the first audience as those who found themselves "pushed, pulled, and shoved away from the truth as Christian faith defines it."[26] David Gowler describes the audience as a community facing multiple sources of trouble including being exiled from their homeland, conflict with fellow Jews over their Christian profession, and their separation from Gentile Christians.

"My brothers and sisters, when you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy." (Jas 1:2). James does not specify the type of trials that his readers are facing. Scholars have suggested that the wording of "trials of any kind" allows the reader to apply his exhortation to daily trials (hunger, arguments with others, financial burdens), internal trials (such as moral temptations, sin, etc.), as well as external trials (injustice, economic exploitation, and persecution). James wants the readers to focus on the results of the trials not on the details of the trials themselves. Ultimately, James is calling for Christians to exercise spiritual maturity and discipline in times of trial.

James desires for his readers to have the right perspective and not to allow their trials to create a theological crisis for them. Thus, he offers the paradox of responding to trials with joy. In verse two, James directs readers to consider it nothing but joy when

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[25] Robert Wall, *Community of the Wise*: *The Letter of James* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 11.

[26] Wall, *Community of the Wise*, 18.

they face trials "because they know that they are working to produce a deeper, stronger, more certain faith."[27] Here, James wants his readers to not rely on their emotions but instead to make a mental judgment about what they are facing. While joy may not be the natural or first reaction to their challenges, James presents joy as the correct response as they grow spiritually mature. He understood that we often cannot control our environment or what happens in our lives. Nevertheless, James maintains a paraenesis tone and urged his audience to choose an attitude of joy in response to the trials they were facing.

Although joy is not the natural response to the suffering that is experienced, the believer can be joyful that the suffering can result in endurance, maturity, and wisdom. This consideration of joy is not to say that the trials result in pleasure or happiness, rather the believer is to remember and focus on the conviction (often taught in the wisdom tradition) that adversity strengthens character. As such, Gowler offers that James desires for his readers to center their attention on what the trials and testing will produce "an active steadfastness of faith - endurance, wholeness, and wisdom."[28] He sees trials and testing as an opportunity to endure which proves a believer's faith and leads to God-gifted wisdom. James' letter suggests that properly interpreting our circumstances is a part of wisdom.

The testing of your faith produces endurance (Jas. 1:3). The first readers of the epistle were familiar with the heroic concepts of suffering and being persecuted because of one's commitment to the faith. Dibelius notes how the early Jewish-Christian

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[27] Moo, *James,* 27.

[28] Gowler, *James Through the Centuries*, 64.

community closely connected the ideas of affliction, endurance, patience, perfection and confirmation. He further suggests that the devoutly religious Jew would have learned to view suffering in this manner from the "school of life and school of theology."[29] The Jewish tradition often referenced Joseph and Job as exemplary examples of faithful endurance.

Instead of focusing on the trial itself, James shifts the lens to how believers should endure their circumstances. James advances these beliefs with the argument that trials should be received with joy. He encourages readers to respond with joy as an act of their faith. James understands that trials can test faith; however, his argument is for a faith that believes God will see one through any trial they may face. Scott McKnight notes that James advocates for a faith that endures tests and emerges with its virtues intact. He goes on to suggest that this level of faith produces "fidelity, stability, and the ability to retain one's faith in spite of the stress persecution might cause."[30]

"And let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing" (Jas. 1:4). In *The Scandalous Message of James*, Elsa Tamez writes that James advocates for his readers to persevere, to resist, to be constant, and unbreakable. Tamez suggests that James wants readers to reflect on the beneficial outcome of their suffering. For him, the focal point is how the believer's perseverance and endurance will positively impact their spiritual character. James argues that this affliction will produce endurance. Dibelius notes that James provides a progressive argument that "from

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[29] Dibelius, *James*, 76.

[30] Scot McKnight, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 75.

persecution proceeds endurance, and endurance makes possible an even higher goal: that you may be perfect and complete."[31] Essentially, James wants his readers to let endurance work in accordance with what God intended for it to do, which is to produce a mature and complete believer. Thus, endurance bolster's the believer's character and serves to strengthen their trust in God's providence and divine purpose.

From the beginning of the Epistle, James argues that the purpose of trials is to produce mature believers. For James, affliction produces endurance, and this endurance is necessary for creating a perfect work. James believes that trials have a divine purpose, so he instructs his readers to let endurance finish its work. He does not want them to forfeit maturity or become impatient and give up before they become "complete." McCartney concludes that in James' letter the "strengthening of endurance through trials is an important aspect of Christian life, and without it the Christian is ill-equipped for service to God."[32]

Summary

It has been said that faith is not faith until it is tested. The message that James used to encourage the early church, is still a relevant mandate for today's Christian community: be assured that the testing of your faith (through experience) produces endurance (leading to spiritual maturity, and inner peace). During difficult times, faith and theological beliefs can be greatly challenged. In the absence of a spiritual perspective or theological framework, we can misinterpret the challenges we face. In moments of true

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[31] Dibelius, *James*, 72.

[32] McCartney, *James*, 88.

transparency, many Christians might confess frustration or downright anger with what God allows in their life. In her book, *The Night Is Normal*, Dr. Alica Britt Chole argues that disillusionment is a necessary part of the faith journey and can even be evidence of growth.

In the focal text, James offers his perspective on the correct theological response to hard times and forces us to reckon with whether our faith is prepared for the vicissitudes of life. We must nurture a faith that understands that feeling lost, hurt, disappointed, and the like are all part of God's plan and purpose for our lives. Dr. Chole puts it this way, "If we do not normalize the night in the life of faith, we can easily mistake spiritual darkness for spiritual death."[33] Dr. Rob Reimer writes in his book *Soul Care*, that instead of asking "why" when faced with trials and difficulties, we should ask "how." For him, the true exercising of our faith is to figure how God will redeem our situation and make it for our good.[34]

A mature faith understands that faith makes things possible, not necessarily easy. With this in mind, I posit that we must foster the type of faith and spiritual fortitude that trusts God in the valley and follows Him through our dark times. When we remain faithful through difficult circumstances, we open the door for God to do amazing things in and through us. We must trust that God can and will use our journey to build our character, strengthen our resolve, and ultimately produce in us things that we could have never achieved otherwise. It is essential that Christians foster the type of faith and

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[33] Alicia Britt Chole, *The Night is Normal* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Refresh, 2023), 30.

[34] Rob Reimer, *Soul Care: Seven Transformational Principles for a Healthy Soul* (Franklin, TN: Carpenter's Son Publishing, 2016), 199.

spiritual fortitude that trust God not only when things are going well, but more deeply when we are faced with adversity and unexpected trials. Along our Christian journey we will face circumstances that beg the question: Is my faith prepared for this?

Throughout her book Dr. Chole describes how spiritual disillusionment occurs when reality challenges our expectations about life in God. Unexpected situations and challenging circumstances can leave us feeling shocked that God did not protect, prevent, or prepare us for the pain. Once we feel discouraged and allow disillusionment to set in, Chole notes that we often "distance our hearts from faith, hope, and even love to avoid further disappointments."[35] She further laments that "instead of entering the pain *with* God, we avoid the pain *and* God."[36] Hence, she admonishes readers to get out of their head and to remember that 'faith is in God, not in our own understanding."[37]

Dr. Chole warns that the danger for our faith journey is in misinterpreting our hard times and becoming overwhelmed with our emotions and spiritual pain until we "cut anchor and lose, or abandon, our confidence in God, in our ability to follow God, or in the community of God's people."[38] She argues that while adversity, trials, and testing is a normal part of life's journey, a lack of discernment and spiritual tools can make the experience harder and longer than it needs to be. The meanings we place on things and circumstances matter and Dr. Chole warns that our misunderstanding can be costly. Moreover, she cautions Christians to identify untruth and misconceptions so that they can be corrected because they have the power to damage or undo our faith. The good news is

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[35] Chole, *Night is Normal,* 14.

[36] Chole, *Night is Normal*, 14.

[37] Chole, *Night is Normal*, 17.

[38] Chole, *Night is Normal*, 4.

that committing to our faith despite our feelings of disillusionment is a sign that our faith is growing up.

We cannot always predict what will happen in our lives, but we can rest assured that God's nature and God's goodness will never change. I have heard it said that we can trust God's heart when we do not understand God's hand. So, when life gets tough, we must embrace the fact that we can depend on God - not because of what He does but because of what we know about God and God's character. Namely, God is good (Ps. 100:5). "It is the Lord who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed" (Deut. 31:8). "The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble, He cares for those who trust in him" (Na. 1:7). "For surely, I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jer. 29:11). "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

While standing on faith is essential for enduring the trials of life, we also know that most people do not want to feel or be alone when they are hurting. As Christians, we are called to fellowship and commune with one another. In fact, Reverend Dr. Howard-John Wesley contends that "we understand God better in community" and also argues that we discern God better in "conversation than isolation."[39] Thus it is important for Christians to not only worship together, but also to gather for fellowship and the opportunity to have crucial conversations centered on the peaks and valleys of the Christian journey. Within a trusted community, Dr. Chole encourages transparency and advocates a safe space where those struggling with questions are given permission to

[39] Lecture with Dr. Howard-John Wesley, March 21, 2023.

express how they feel without the need to edit their honesty. This is important because she maintains that we "weaken - not strengthen" our faith when we silence sincere questions.[40] "To strengthen our faith *in* God, we need to be honest when we are disillusioned *with* God."[41] Cultivating community and providing a safe space for this honest dialogue can normalize the experiences of hardships and struggles, provide the proper theological framework for understanding trials and suffering, and offer tools for developing spiritual fortitude.

My doctoral project utilized a small group model with young adults that provided practical skills for cultivating spiritual fortitude. Spiritual fortitude is a relatively new construct that seeks to provide habitual ways for spiritual resources to be used to cope with stress and adversity.[42] Dr. Daryl Van Tongeren defines spiritual fortitude as "the confidence that someone has sufficient spiritual resources to face, and grow in the face of a stressor."[43] His definition of spiritual fortitude includes spiritual endurance (withstanding and persevering during difficult times), spiritual enterprise (maintaining integrity during adversity), and the ability to find hope, purpose, and meaning during adversity. I contend that spiritual fortitude also involves the ability to identify and access spiritual resources during times of stress. Furthermore, I posit that spiritual fortitude involves the disciplines of trust, faithfulness, and surrender and is critical in the

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[40] Chole, *Night is Normal*, 58.

[41] Chole, *Night is Normal,* 59.

[42] Hansong Zhang, Joshua N. Hook, Daryl R Van Tongeren, Edward B Davis, Jamie D. Aten, Stacey McElroy-Heltzel, Don E. Davis, Laura Shannonhouse, Adam S. Hodge, and Laura E. Captari, "Spiritual Fortitude: A Systematic Review of the Literature and Implications for COVID-19 Coping," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 8, no. 4 (2021): 230.

[43] Jamie D. Aten, "Resilience and Spiritual Fortitude," Psychology Today, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-resilience/201901/resilience-and-spiritual-fortitude.

discipleship of emotionally healthy Christians. One of the goals of spiritual fortitude is to assist people in reconnecting with or establishing tools of faith that are a source of comfort and support. My desire is to help young adults to properly interpret trials and hardships as opportunities to exercise their faith and cultivate their own spiritual fortitude.

Within our small group, participants were encouraged to take James' stance to view trials and hardships as an invitation to deepen their faith and exercise their spiritual muscle. Understanding the reality that in this life we will face trials and hardships, it is imperative that we gird ourselves with the knowledge that God can and will equip and empower us to endure all that we face. For we know that every time we endure and preserve, we are also growing and maturing our faith. So, we must let perseverance finish its work so that we can be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

To the untrained eye, the Black Church is simply a place of worship. However, when you research its genesis and history you will find that the substance of the Black Church is far greater than just worship. In 2021, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. declared that "No pillar of the African American community has been more central to its history, identity, and social justice vision than the Black Church."[1] Since its inception, the Black Church has used its biblical foundation to impact the social, political, and economic climate of this country. For the enslaved and eventually freed black community, the Black Church became the place where they could curate their personal and spiritual identity, as well as unite in their fight for freedom and equality.

Throughout their enslavement, captured Africans found ways to use their slave quarters to create their own invisible institutions where signals, passwords, and messages could be shared. There are also written records of hush harbors that were used as gathering spaces to exercise their religious beliefs through chants, spirituals, and preaching. These institutions and harbors would eventually give birth to what we now call the Black Church. The Black Church was not only a spiritual resource for its members but was also an integral part of slave rebellions, strategically supported the

[1] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "To Understand America, You Need to Understand the Black Church," Time, https://time.com/5939921/henry-lous-gates-american-history-black-church/.

Underground Railroad, and was the launching pad for many orators of the abolition movement.

From 1865-1869, the Reconstruction Amendments were passed. These amendments abolished slavery, granted citizenship to former slaves, and provided voting rights for African American men. In defiance of these new freedoms, Southern states responded with state laws known as "Black Codes" that harshly regulated and greatly restricted the daily lives of the ex-slaves. Amid these transitional times the Black Church became a safe space for the formerly enslaved and emerged as a crucial social hub for the newly freed people. In the context of the church, African Americans were able to strategize and navigate the tasks of reuniting families, finding jobs, and figuring out what it meant to live as citizens rather than property. The Black Church also promoted positive messages of racial and individual self-affirmation, created educational opportunities for teaching and learning, as well as provided messages of faith and hope for a better future.

Once slavery ended, African Americans were faced with new forms of racism with the emergence of the Jim Crow Era and the rise in lynching. As a result, anti-lynching campaigns and economic boycotts were fueled by the Black Church. During the turbulent years of the Jim Crow Era, the Black Church served as a lifeline and safe space away from a racist world. As the black community grappled with the liminal space of no longer being enslaved but not yet free, Gates depicts the Black Church as a "place for African Americans to come together in community to advance their aspirations and to sing out, pray out, and shout out their frustrations."[2]

[2] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Black Church* (New York, NY: Penguin Press, 2021), 3.

This chapter will review the emergence of the Black Church post-emancipation. It will also detail its essential role as a refuge and source of support for the newly freed black community as they began to fight for their rights as United States citizens. The final section will define spiritual fortitude and show how the Black Church has instilled spiritual fortitude in its members before it was called such. While the terminology, spiritual fortitude, is new in the literature, the concept is deeply embedded in the life of the Black Church. I contend that spiritual fortitude undergirds the weekly conversation between black pastors and their people since the beginning of our experience in America.

The Invisible Institution

The first documented arrival of enslaved Africans landed in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. The United States slave trade was a horrific, inhumane, and evil system characterized by the physical, psychological, and sexual violence perpetrated against the Africans that were forcibly brought to work on the plantations. The enslaved were subjected to systematic brutality that was often used to destroy human dignity and annihilate black families. This included prohibiting marriages among the enslaved and the practice of taking children from their parents (and oftentimes selling them to other slave owners).

Many enslaved people were made to worship with their owners or had services where they were closely monitored by a white person. Slave owners viewed Christianity as a viable way to control the enslaved, and thus introduced the religion to those on their land. The slave owners hoped that this religious exposure would quell concerns about rebellion and other conversations that might spark desires for freedom. Theologian James

Cone describes this tactic as a "white prostitution of the faith."[3] Despite these efforts, the enslaved Africans quickly married their native beliefs with Christianity to create a unique faith expression and understanding of God.

In the Northern part of the country, the Methodist and Baptist denominations became appealing to the black community as they promoted the idea that all Christians were equal in the sight of God. Additionally, Northern churches were used as stations or rest stops for the Underground Railroad. Several Methodist churches were built by the enslaved for religious education and to serve as mission work to enslaved congregants. Black Christians would later seek legal ownership of these edifices but were met with staunch resistance from white Southern Methodists who viewed the labor as generous aid given to them.[4]

Richard Allen is known as the founder and first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1777, while attending a religious meeting known as The Methodist Society Meetings, Allen converted to Christianity. Allen was born into slavery and at the age of seven was purchased along with his brother and father by landowner, Stokley Sturgis. Allen exhibited great enthusiasm for his newfound faith and was eventually permitted to invite Methodist preachers to host worship services at the home of the landowner. Sturgis would also join the Methodist Society and ultimately allowed Allen and his brother to buy their freedom. Once freed, Richard Allen began preaching the gospel throughout Delaware, New York, Pennsylvania, and Maryland. In 1786, Allen

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[3] James Cones, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Ortis Books, 2018), 69.

[4] Elizabeth L. Jemison, "Emancipation: Christian Identity Amid Slavery's End, 1863-1866," in *Christian Citizens: Reading the Bible in Black and White in the Post Emancipation South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 37-38.

was permitted to lead a 5:00 a.m. service at St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. His sermons appealed to black worshipers which eventually fueled tensions with the white members and officers. The growing number of black worshipers led the leadership to build a balcony to segregate the congregation. This arrangement infuriated Allen and ultimately led him to leave the church. In 1794, he founded Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church. One year later, Mother Bethel had a membership of 121 members. Ten years later the membership had grown to more than 450 members.[5]

Birth of the Black Church

The black church was built by the enslaved and from the start was the epicenter in the fight for recognition of the personhood and freedom of its members. Reverend Raphael Warnock suggests that the Black Church has "a unique political consciousness that was shaped in the brutal context of chattel slavery, racial oppression, and state-sanctioned terrorism."[6] Historian Juan Floyd-Thomas wrote about the creation and timeline of the Black Church and maintains that "although the history of black Christianity has often been portrayed as being quite conservative and traditional in both thought and practice, liberation has been the central theme of Black religious life."[7] James Cone describes the creation of the Black Church as "the sole source of personal

[5] "Our Pastoral History," Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, https:/motherbethel.org/our-pastoral-history/.

[6] Raphael Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York, NY: New York Press, 2013), 14.

[7] Juan Floyd-Thomas, *Liberating Black Church History: Making It Plain* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2014), 13.

identity" and "sense of community" for "black people whose daily existence was an encounter with the overwhelming and brutalizing reality of white power."[8]

For many, the Black Church offered hope and respite from the horror and atrocities they faced daily. The "invisible institution" became a visible and tangible expression of their newly declared emancipation. The Black Church stood in stark contrast to the white churches that were silent, and often, complicit and actively participating in the oppressive systems of slavery and segregation. Cone argues that freedom and equality were the lifeline of the Black Church noting that "freedom and equality are at the essence of humanity, and thus segregation and slavery are diametrically opposed to Christianity."[9] Dr. Henry L. Gates, Jr. describes Black Churches as symbols of rebellion and protest, as well as physical symbols of black folks striking against the status quo. He also highlights how the Black Church offered a reprieve from a racist world and was "the cultural cauldron that Black people created to combat a system designed in every way to crush their spirit."[10]

After the emancipation, the newly freed were faced with the daunting task of trying to create a life in a hostile and segregated world. Elizabeth Jemison notes that in the decades following the Civil War, black and white Christians had starkly different racial and theological agendas. Black Christians often credited divine assistance for slavery's end. The Black Church contended that slavery and all forms of racial discrimination were anti-Christian and pushed for all Christians to oppose all types of

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[8] Cone, *Black Theology*, 65.

[9] Cone, *Black Theology*, 66.

[10] Gates, *Black Church*, xx.

racial hierarchy. Furthermore, they argued that lynching had no place in Christian society.

Conversely, white southern Christians deemed the end of slavery as the misguided work of Northern politics and "a divine affliction that God allowed for their purification, not a final judgment on an evil institution or evidence of racial equality."[11] Jemison asserts that "with each major change from emancipation to segregation, southern Christians remade their political framework with religious arguments that defended the social order they found most familiar."[12] In his book, Floyd-Thomas provides generous examples of how the emancipation of the enslaved "could not dismantle the racial antipathy that would gradually coalesce into the system of racial segregation that would condemn Black women, men, and children to second-class citizenship during the long century of struggle."[13]

Faced with the reality that the white Christian community refused to acknowledge their humanity and their identity as Christians, freed black Christians started their own churches. They simply could not accept the deeply embedded racism that was rampant in the white churches. Cone suggests that this separation allowed black Christians to free themselves from white control which allowed them to worship God in the true spirit of the gospel.[14] The large number of black churches that were established in the North and

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[11] Jemison, "Emancipation: Christian Identity Amid Slavery's End, 1863-1866," 36.

[12] Elizabeth Jemison, "Conclusion: Family Values and Racial Order," in *Christian Citizens: Reading the Bible in Black and White in the Post Emancipation South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 162.

[13] Floyd-Thomas, *Liberating Black Church*, 56.

[14] Cone, *Black Theology*, 67.

South helped create thriving black communities that contained schools, banks, housing, insurance companies, as well as various artistic developments.

Scholars typically define the Black Church as "the conglomeration of specific denominations that was created, founded, governed, and populated overwhelmingly by Blacks."[15] During the first half of the twentieth century, the following denominations accounted for more than eighty percent of all black Christians: African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (AME Zion), Christian Methodist Episcopal Church (CME), Church of God in Christ (COGIC), National Baptist Convention, USA (NBC), National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA), and Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC).[16] As such, the Black Church has never been a monolith but instead is made up of a variety of theology, history, beliefs, and practices. This often eventuated in disagreements within the Black Church community over the best political and social strategies needed to gain equal rights. Nevertheless, the Black Church was united in the belief that they were Americans and Christians who deserved the autonomy to govern their lives and their communities as they saw fit. Warnock identifies the Black Church's inclusive claim and acknowledgement of "Black personhood" as the "single, unifying strand historically setting the Black church apart as the conscience of the American churches."[17]

Among the oldest Black Churches are: Silver Bluff Baptist Church in Beech Island, South Carolina (founded sometime between 1750-1788), Bethel A.M.E. Church

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[15] Floyd-Thomas, *Liberating Black Church*, 58.

[16] Gates, Jr., *The Black Church*, 9.

[17] Warnock, *Divided Mind*, 14.

in Baltimore, Maryland (1787), First African Baptist Church in Savannah, Georgia (1787); Springfield Baptist Church in Augusta, Georgia (1788), Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia (1794); and Mother Zion in New York City (1796).[18] The African Methodist Episcopal Church was formed in 1816 and is recognized as the first independent black denomination. It was followed by the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church which was formed in 1822. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya recognize these Methodist churches and their black Baptist counterparts as the first national organizations created by African Americans.[19] The National Baptist Convention, USA was formed in 1895. By 1906, the convention had a membership of more than 2.2 million members. By 1916, it was the third largest religious body in the United States; only the Roman Catholic Church and Methodist Episcopal church had more members.[20] While black people struggled to find acceptance and fought against discrimination from the outside world, they found affirmation and respect for their humanity when participating in their church activities.

Despite the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery in all parts of the United States in December of 1865, black men and women of the rural south found their freedom restricted by new customs and laws that W.E.B. DuBois likened to an "economic slavery."[21] These laws, known as Black Codes, were largely adopted by Southern states,

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[18] C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 147.

[19] Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 116.

[20] Gates, *Black Church*, 96-97.

[21] Patricia Hinchey, *The Souls of Black Folk by W. E. B. DuBois: With a Critical Introduction by Patricia H. Hinchey* (Bloomfield, NJ: Myers Education Press, 2018), 34.

and denied black people the rights, privileges, and opportunities enjoyed by other citizens. For instance, black people were denied the opportunity to own land, had restrictions on their mobility, and were often unable to testify in court proceedings. In Mississippi, The Black Codes also barred "any freedman, free Negro or mulatto from exercising the function of minister of the Gospel without a license from some regularly organized church."[22] Paris and Crump described these laws as the South's attempt to relegate black people to a "caste not measurably higher than slavery."[23]

In addition to the Black Codes, black people were also subjected to a racial caste system known as Jim Crow that was rooted in the maintenance of white racial domination through laws, violence, and the destruction of property. Paul Ortiz argues that the Jim Crow system was designed to keep black people "as close to slavery as possible."[24] The Jim Crow era was a way of life based on the following beliefs: white people were superior to black people intellectually and morally; sexual relations between white people and black people would produce a "mongrel race" and destroy America; treating black people as equals would encourage interracial sexual relationships; and that violence was the way to keep black people at the bottom of the racial hierarchy.[25] During this time, most social institutions and professional fields such as the medical, religious, education,

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[22] Jemison, "Emancipation," 40.

[23] Paris and Crump, *Theological Ethics*, 230.

[24] Paul Ortiz, "We Are in The Hands of the Devil: Fighting Racial Terrorism," in *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920*, 1st ed. (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 67.

[25] David Pilgrim, "What Was Jim Crow," Jim Crow Museum, https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/what.htm.

and journalism, supported and even promoted the belief that black people were inherently inferior to Whites.

In June 1866, the Fourteenth Amendment made black people citizens of the state where they resided as well as citizens of the United States. It also prohibited states from making or enforcing laws that would restrict the privileges of citizens of the United States. Sadly, this Amendment would not eventuate in actual freedom for black citizens. Instead, it only fueled the terroristic efforts of the Ku Klux Klan organization that started in late 1865. The Fifteenth Amendment was passed by Congress in 1869 and gave black men the right to vote. Tragically, the enactment of these amendments did not stop the violence perpetrated on the black community. The racial tensions of the time caused W. E. B. DuBois to lament about the peculiar sensation and double consciousness of being American and Negro. He described it as "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[26] His writings articulated the deep disappointment that he felt rested upon the black community.

In his book, Henry Louis Gates argues that faith has long been the source of courage for those on the front lines of change. Black Christians advocated for their civil and political rights as Christians as well as fellow American citizens. Moreover, they attacked the hypocrisy of white southern Christians who openly supported segregation policies and racial violence. As a result of their advocacy, the Black Church served as the launching pad for many African American leaders in the political, educational, and community sectors. In 1870, Hiram Revels, a minister from Mississippi, became the first

[26] Paris and Crump, *Theological Ethics*, 242.

African American elected to the Senate. During Reconstruction, sixteen more African Americans were elected to Congress, three of which were ministers. Throughout the Jim Crow Era, more than 2,000 African Americans held offices at every level of government. Of those officials, more than 240 were ministers, which was second to farmers.[27]

Despite the passage of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and the Fifteenth Amendments, the Supreme Court's decision in the Plessy v. Ferguson case (1896) which affirmed "separate but equal" conditions allowed the Jim Crow way of life to flourish. The harsh realities of the Jim Crow Era greatly impacted the daily life of the black community. In his book *Emancipation Betrayed*, Paul Ortiz argued that segregation and violence were an inseparable combination. He stressed that the goal of the racial violence was to destroy the black community's claims "to basic rights, dignity, and protection from the state."[28] Sadly this violence also included the destruction of many Black Churches which were destroyed by fire throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In 1903, Dubois famously proclaimed in *The Souls of Black Folks* that the problem of the twentieth century was the problem of the color line. Black Americans found themselves subjected to racial and gender violence at the hands of white Americans who believed that white men's power was "God's orderly social vision" and deemed black Christians claims of equal rights as a "refusal to submit to God's design."[29] The Black Church often blasted the ideals of racial inferiority and instead pointed out the damning legacy of slavery as the basis for any racial differences. Floyd-Thomas asserts

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[27] Henry L. Gates, Jr., "To Understand America, You Need to Understand the Black Church," Time, https://time.com/5939921/henry-lous-gates-american-history-black-church/.

[28] Ortiz, "In The Hands Of The Devil," 63.

[29] Jemison, "Family Values," 167.

that the symbolism and biblical images of the Exodus narrative undergirded the hope of black Christians who faced daily racial oppression and segregation. He further argues that it was the Black Church that empowered black Christians to "remain sane in the midst of the sheer insanity of chattel slavery and the utter absurdity of Jim Crow Segregation."[30] Cone characterized the Black Church as a safe haven from the "dehumanizing forces of white power" and a refuge from the "new racist structures that replaced slavery."[31]

The Black Church was at the forefront of the fight against segregation and advocated for Christians to take a stance against and oppose all forms of racial injustice. It desired for white Christians to live up to the ethical mandates of the Christian faith, which had to acknowledge that white supremacy is not in alignment with God's word. Warnock writes that the Black Church provided the "most radical and sustained response to racism."[32] Conversely, white southern Christians "believed that anti-slavery northern Christians held heretical views and that black Christians were racially and religiously inferior…they rejected dialogue with those who disagreed with them and isolated their communities from all who might challenge their views of Christianity, history, and politics."[33] They held the belief that "all social and good governance rested on the model of a household directed by a white man whom his wife, children, and servants obeyed."[34] In the same vein, they defended their opposition to Reconstruction and racial violence

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[30] Floyd-Thomas, *Liberating Black Church*, 14.

[31] Cone, *Black Theology*, 71.

[32] Warnock, *Divided Mind*, 14.

[33] Jemison, "Family Values," 162.

[34] Jemison, "Emancipation," 41.

toward black people with the same theology that they used to defend slavery. In their mind, these tactics were necessary to maintain social order.

White violence and rage often centered around defending the white family, the supremacy of the white male, and the virtue of the white woman. The film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the book Gone with the Wind (1936) further perpetuated the stereotypes regarding the black community and fears surrounding white female vulnerability. These fears were rooted in black male sexual impropriety and the possibility of sexual threats towards white women. Yet Jemison highlights the irony of this behavior, namely the "long history of white men's sexual power over enslaved women."[35]

Ida B. Wells was one of the nation's most famous and outspoken critic regarding the horrors of lynching. Subsequently, she was forced to leave Memphis after writing about the lynching of three successful African American men. These lynchings fueled her lifelong work of disputing the information often used as reasons for lynching. Her writings often cited economic and political reasons for the lynching atrocities, instead of the often-used allegations of black men assaulting and or raping white women. As a result of her advocacy, she was invited to speak at the first annual meeting of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) where she delivered a stirring anti-lynching address.

Amidst this turmoil, the Black Church became the hub of black life and sought to address the social, educational, economic, and political needs of the community. Floyd-Thomas suggests that next to the family, "the historic Black Church tradition became the

[35] Jemison, "Family Values," 170.

most important institution" for Black Christians."[36] Several social and civic organizations depended on these churches for meeting spaces, leadership and guidance, financial donations, publicity, and most importantly members.[37] Literacy was often seen as a symbol of autonomy, and so large numbers of men, women, and children quickly took advantage of the opportunity to learn to read and write. W.E.B. DuBois wrote that in the south there was strong resistance and hostility to Negro education "for the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro."[38]

The 1890 U.S. Census reported that nine out of ten black people lived in the South.[39] Starting in 1910, there was a mass exodus of black Southerners who left the South for northern and western cities. This Great Migration was fueled by the desire to flee Jim Crow segregation and violence, a decline in sharecropping, as well as the need for factory labor and the promise of better jobs and economic stability in the North. It is estimated that more than 1.2 million black people left the South during the first wave of the Great Migration (1910-1930).[40] From 1930 to 1970, more than five million black Southerners left, making the Great Migration the largest internal migration that America had ever experienced.[41]

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[36] Floyd-Thomas, *Liberating Black Church*, 58.

[37] Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience,* 123.

[38] Hinchey, *Souls of Black Folk*, 29.

[39]. McKenney, Johnson, Porter, *The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population of the United States,* 23.

[40] Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience,* 118.

[41] McKenney, Johnson, and Porter, *The Social and Economic Status of the Black Population of the United States*, 15.

This made the Black Church a critical resource for the survival of black families as they sought to create new lives for themselves. New arrivals often had limited resources and little to no family support, so the Black Church took the responsibility for helping its members to adjust, survive, and thrive in their new surroundings. Lincoln and Mamiya describe Black Churches during this time as "multifunctional and multipurpose institutions."[42] For example, the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, Reverend Adam Clayton Powell, opened one of the first soup kitchens to help feed the hungry in his community.[43]

While the North was not known for the same oppressive racism that plagued the Jim Crow South, there were practices and customs that let black people know that they were to avoid certain residential areas, hotels, restaurants, social scenes, and even churches. Breaches of these unspoken rules and customs often resulted in violence against the offender. In 1919, this de facto segregation and rampant discrimination led to an eruption of riots in several cities that came to be known as the "Red Summer."[44] Undeterred by the violent atrocities of the time, the Black Church would continue their fight for equality and remain a vocal opponent of the racial segregation and discrimination experienced by African Americans. This fight for true freedom and equality would eventually give birth to the Civil Rights Movement which ultimately led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

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[42] Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 110.

[43] Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 121.

[44] Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience,* 122.

Shadowed Beneath Thy Hand

In the decades following their emancipation, the black community struggled to make sense of the cruel realities that they faced. Persevering in the face of daily discrimination and dehumanizing circumstances required a strength of spirit that was fostered in the Black Church. Each week, black pastors sought to deliver a message from the Lord to encourage and sustain members who were being smothered under the weight of white oppression. In the church, the black community was able to see themselves as more than what society said about them. They were reminded of their worth and encouraged to embrace the truth that they were important to God. Pastors told their congregants to trust God in the valley and follow God despite the grim circumstances they were experiencing. The Church's message was one of hope, reminding its members to hold fast to their faith. The black Christian community endured because they believed that God was on the side of the oppressed, which meant that God was also on their side.

In 1900, James Weldon Johnson wrote a poem that would affectionately become known as the Black National Anthem. His words accurately articulated the hope of black Americans to experience true freedom in this country. The NAACP would eventually adopt the song and used it frequently as a rallying cry during the Civil Rights Movement.[45]

> Lift every voice and sing, til earth and heaven ring,
> Ring with the harmony of Liberty;
> Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies
> Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
>
> Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us
> Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;

[45] James W. Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," NAACP, https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/lift-every-voice-and-sing.

Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on 'til victory is won.

Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered.
Out from the gloomy past, 'til now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by Thy might, Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand, True to our God, True to our native land.[46]

More than a hundred years ago, W. E. B. DuBois wrote about the double consciousness of being black and Christian in America. This reality remains a source of tension for today's black Christians. Floyd-Thomas describes it this way: "Caught between the polar extremes of despair and hope, African Americans continue to face stark situations with a steady and abiding religious faith."[47]

Spiritual Fortitude as a Firm Foundation

Today, religious beliefs are often seen as a personal or private affair. However, the Black Church thrives in community and is rooted in the care of its members within their context. As such, it remains a valuable source of support and comfort to those who

[46] James W. Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," NAACP, https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/lift-every-voice-and-sing.

[47] Floyd-Thomas, *Liberating Black Church History,* 18.

are struggling or in need of hope. A preacher once said that there is no hopeless situation, only those who lose hope in their situation. The absence of hope can be devastating for the soul. Those who put their hope in the Lord understand that our worst circumstances are under the control of our God. Floyd Thomas suggests that black Christians understand their faith to be more than religious practices of prayer and church attendance, but also the inclusion of the "deep conviction that through God's grace, love, and mercy, tomorrow can be better than yesterday."[48] Thus, I posit that the Black Church is the perfect place to cultivate spiritual fortitude.

Researchers have found a positive relationship between spiritual fortitude and a person's well-being.[49] Unlike the concepts of grit and resilience that rely heavily on self-perspective and the individual maintaining mastery and control, spiritual fortitude transcends an individual focus and instead shifts to a divine perspective. Researchers concede that while spiritual fortitude is new in the field of psychology, it has long been understood and promoted in religious communities. Van Tongeren et al define spiritual fortitude as the ability to endure hardships while maintaining one's integrity, as well as making redemptive meaning of their experience through their connection with God.[50] They determined that spiritual fortitude involved: actively leaning into adversity (spiritual endurance); adaptive metabolizing of suffering (redemptive purpose); and pro-socially responding to it (spiritual enterprise).[51] Their research found that spiritual fortitude had a

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[48] Floyd-Thomas, *Liberating Black Church History*, 14.

[49] Zang et al, "Religious and Spiritual Struggles," 270.

[50] Daryl Van Tongeren, Jamie D. Aten, Stacey McElroy, Don E. Davis, Laura Shannonhouse, Edward B. Davis, and Joshua N. Hook, "Development and Validation of a Measure of Spiritual Fortitude," *Psychological Trauma*: *Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 11, no. 6 (2011): 588.

[51] Van Tongeren et al, "Measure of Spiritual Fortitude," 589.

"direct effect on meaning in life and spiritual well-being."[52] Hence, they discovered that people who score high in spiritual fortitude demonstrate a greater capacity to draw from their religious and spiritual resources when faced with challenges and adversity.[53] As a result, they concluded that spiritual fortitude was a "useful construct in understanding the process of adjusting to, and thriving, in the midst of adversity, suffering, and trauma."[54]

In other words, spiritual fortitude provides a framework for understanding and empowers a person to endure their trials and interpret adversity with resolve and faith in God. Van Tongeren et al view spiritual fortitude as a multifaceted construct that "reflects a spiritual depth and capacity for authentic spiritual engagement despite hardships."[55] Zhang et al contend that individuals with high levels of spiritual fortitude are able to tap into their reservoir of spiritual resources when they are faced with adversity and stress.[56] Spiritual fortitude is concerned with how you endure trials and adversity, and individuals with high levels of spiritual fortitude are committed to enduring well. They have confidence that they have sufficient spiritual resources to endure and even prosper despite any challenges.

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[52] Stacey McElroy-Heltzel, Daryl Van Tongeren, Sarah Gazaway, Ana Ordaz, Don E. Davis, Joshua N. Hook, Edward B. Davis, Jamie D. Aten, Laura R. Shannonhouse, and Nicole A. Stargell, "The Role of Spiritual Fortitude and Positive Religious Coping in Meaning in Life and Spiritual Well-Being Following Hurricane Matthew," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity, Suppl. Special Issue: Disaster, Religion, and Spirituality* 37, no. 1 (2023): 24.

[53] McElroy-Heltzel et al, "Spiritual Fortitude and Positive Religious Coping," 17.

[54] Van Tongeren et al, "Measure of Spiritual Fortitude," 588.

[55] Van Tongeren et al, "Measure of Spiritual Fortitude," 589.

[56] Hansong Zhang, Joshua N. Hook, Adam S. Hodge, David K. Mosher, Daryl Van Tongere, and Don E. Davis, "Religious and Spiritual Struggles and Mental Health Following A Disaster: The Moderating Role of Spiritual Fortitude," *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 8, no. 4 (2015): 270.

I argue that spiritual fortitude is a stubborn and unrelenting determination to remain anchored in God despite the hardships of life. The purpose of cultivating spiritual fortitude is to provide spiritual perspective and tools for interpreting and enduring hardships, as well as to increase the likelihood that the individual will remain engaged with their faith and their faith community while navigating the trials of life. Those who cultivate spiritual fortitude understand that instead of feeling punished or abandoned by God or frustrated with their faith; they can trust God and adhere to James' exhortation to consider it pure joy when faced with trials of many kinds (Jas. 1:2).

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Much like the disciples who were overwhelmed by the storm that was battering their boat as they crossed the Sea of Galilee with Jesus, Christians in pain often find themselves wrestling with their faith and crying out "Teacher, do You not care!" (Mk. 4:38). Unexpected disasters, threats to our mortality, changes in relationships, grief, loss, and physical pain often produce feelings of anxiety and distress that can tempt us to ask many questions such as: Why is this happening to me? Why didn't God stop this from happening to me? Will I get through this? Can I trust God? How can a loving and all-wise God allow bad things to happen to good people? These nagging questions and feelings of distress can leave us feeling disappointed in God due to our expectations of what we believe God could or should be doing on our behalf. Thus, many theologians and Christian scholars have sought to make sense of pain and suffering and to provide biblical references on how to navigate life's challenges. This work has birthed the theological explanation known as theodicy. Natalie Kertes Weaver describes theodicy as "the effort to understand God's fundamental nature, complicated by the logical difficulties posed by the reality of evil and suffering."[1] In addition to theodicy, scholars have also crafted a Theology of Suffering which seeks to provide a biblical perspective

[1] Natalie Kertes Weaver, *The Theology of Suffering and Death: An Introduction for Caregivers* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 4.

on God's sovereignty, God's omnipresence, the reality of human suffering, and even the gift of grace.

In his book *Trusting God*, Jerry Bridges acknowledges that "the problem of pain is as old as the history of man and just as universal."[2] When faced with life's challenges and painful circumstances, Bridges writes that Christians often must answer two questions, which are the same question, can I trust *God,* and can *I* trust God? The first question is pushing the person to admit and believe that God is dependable in times of adversity. The second question emphasizes your personal relationship with God and your confidence that God is with you through adversity even when you cannot sense God's presence and power.

Bridges asserts that when life gets tough, it can be harder for us to trust God than it was for us to obey Him. "Obeying God is worked out within well-defined boundaries of God's revealed will. Trusting God is worked out in an arena that has no boundaries. We do not know the extent, the duration, or the frequency of the painful, adverse circumstances in which we must frequently trust God."[3] Thus, trusting God requires the type of faith that rests in the truth of who God is. For him, trusting God only comes from having an intimate and personal relationship with God. This relationship with God and an understanding of who God is, serves as an anchor for the Believer in times of adversity. Connor Bales reminds individuals facing hardships that "it is critically important to embrace the sovereignty of God at all times. If God were not sovereign, then the hope of

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[2] Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 2017), 4.

[3] Bridges, *Trusting God*, 6.

those who suffer would be left to whatever the best their circumstances are able to provide."[4]

Understanding this reality of human existence, it is easy to see why difficult times can shake a Believer to their core. When faced with overwhelming circumstances, a person's joy may feel diminished, their perspective may turn negative, and their faith can even be shaken to its core. However, those experiences do not have to rob Believers of their hope and faith in God. I contend that one of the ways to prevent becoming dismayed and discouraged while enduring hardships is to allow other Christians to walk alongside us and to keep us encouraged and reminded that we belong to a community of faith. As a member of the faith community, those who are struggling should find support from other Believers that are willing to bear their burdens and thus fulfill the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). In the best-case scenario, a Believer's hardships and how they endure trials may inspire and impact those who are watching and connected to their lives. With that in mind, this chapter will review the church's response to both pain and suffering, as well as explore the theological concepts of theodicy and the Theology of Suffering. The Black Church's use of redemptive suffering will also be discussed. Considering these perspectives, a case for cultivating spiritual fortitude in the lives of Christians is presented.

The Problem of Pain

We live in a fallen world. As a result, crime, war, cancer, abuse, and other atrocities are a part of our earthly existence. Many describe this phenomenon as evil and

[4] Connor Bales, "Counted Worthy: A Father's Perspective on the Theology of Suffering," (Diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, 2020), 114, ProQuest One Academic.

have wondered if God causes these things to happen. Moreover, some have wondered why God allows these situations to occur at all. While it is common to use the terms pain and suffering interchangeably, the literature suggests that they are very different experiences. Gerald Peterman and Andrew Schmutzer define pain as an objective, external thing, or event (i. e. broken bone, poverty, betrayal, hunger, etc.). In contrast, they view suffering as a subjective, internal, mental, or emotional experience. In his book *Disciplines of the Spirit,* Howard Thurman contextualizes suffering as the conscious awareness of pain and suggests that it is a universal experience for all living creatures.

Natalie Keartes Weaver argues that humanity is not alone in their experience of pain: "For, God has suffered human pain in the life of Jesus."[5] Scripture records that in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was anguished as he prepared for the journey to the cross. In his moment of sorrow and distress, Jesus acknowledges that all things are possible for God and follows with the request that this cup be taken from him. Peterman and Schmutzer argue that just as Jesus was fully human and acquainted with pain and sorrow, Christians should also expect that their lives will be a mixture of both joy and pain.[6]

As a result of her own experience with navigating pain and suffering, Alicia Britt Chole wrote *The Night Is Normal* as a guide and source of comfort for Christians managing deep personal pain. In her book, she argues that life's trials and struggles have created many "spiritually shipwrecked souls"[7] and observes that people experiencing

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[5] Natalie Kertes Weaver, *The Theology of Suffering and Death: An Introduction for Caregivers* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 11.

[6] Gerald Peterman and Andrew Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace: A Biblical Theology of Suffering* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2016), 88.

[7] Alicia Britt Chole, *The Night Is Normal* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Refresh, 2023), 4.

spiritual pain, "are naturally motivated by what *we* want. Wisdom invites us to begin with a different question: What does *God* want?"[8] She goes on to warn Christians against allowing pain to cause them to misinterpret the night until they "cut anchor and lose, or abandon, our confidence in God, in our ability to follow God, or in the community of God's people."[9] Instead, Britt Chole advocates for normalizing night time experiences for Believers so that they do not mistake "spiritual darkness for spiritual death."[10] Moreover, she reminds Christians that "Your nights, though normal, are not eternal. And within each one is an invitation to strengthen your relationship with God."[11]

The Dark Night of the Soul

While trials and adversity may be a normality of life, they certainly can be difficult to endure. Early Christian theologians often referred to this struggle as the dark night of the soul. St. John of the Cross, a Spanish priest, mystic, and Carmelite monk, penned the poem, *The Dark Night of the Soul*, which details a soul's dark journey to the divine union with God. In it he describes three stages of a Believer's development. In the first stage known as Purgation, St. John of the Cross compares the Believer's love to the attachment and love of an infant for their mother. He argues that God must purge the young believer of "the need for spiritual pleasure as well as the habit of measuring the

[8] Chole, *The Night Is Normal*, 64.

[9] Chole, *The Night Is Normal,* 4.

[10] Chole, *The Night Is Normal,* 30.

[11] Chole, *The Night Is Normal,* 24.

presence and favor of God by spiritual feelings or senses."[12] The second stage, Illumination, is where the Believer's love for God is less about pleasure and grows towards a loving relationship that is based on love for love's sake. In *Musing on the Dark Night of the Soul*, John Coe likens this second phase to a marriage. During the final stage, known as Union, the Believer finally experiences loving God for God's sake. Coe uses Jesus' declaration in Gethsemane as the perfect example for this stage: "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Lk. 22:42).

St. John of the Cross knew that the dark night of the soul would be a confusing and uncomfortable experience for Christians. However, he deemed the journey a necessary season of growth. Coe agrees and notes "Though the feel of the dark night is precisely the opposite of the truth, beginners are inclined to avoid this experience altogether and go back to the old way of experiencing God based on their senses. Therefore, God must initiate this process because few would willingly go to the place of trusting God in darkness, by faith, rather than by what can be felt."[13] Moreover, he contends that "the Spirit secretly does a deep work in the human spirit - a work that is so profound but feels so foreign to the Christian's experience that it is often interpreted as the absence of God."[14] During this dark night, Believers may struggle to find joy in their routine spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, worship, and church attendance.

As Believers walk through their dark night experience, it becomes imperative that they rely on their faith and not their feelings. Emotions often provide an inaccurate

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[12] John H. Coe, "Musing on the Dark Night of the Soul: Insights from St. John of the Cross on a Developmental Spirituality," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 28, no. 4 (2000): 295.

[13] Coe, "Musing on the Dark Night of the Soul," 303.

[14] Coe, "Musing on the Dark Night of the Soul," 293.

measure of God's presence in one's life. During this time encouragement, guidance, and wisdom from trusted members of the faith community can counter a Believer's desire to withdraw or abandon their faith. As such, Coe recommends therapy as a viable option, writing "A loving and insightful therapist can model in therapy what God as Counselor wishes to do in the life of the believer."[15]

Theodicy

As a Christian, our perspective on pain and suffering matters. In the face of heartbreak, hardships, and tragedy, it is tempting to question the goodness of God. During these difficult times and periods of pain, it is easy to feel like God is uninterested or even hidden from our circumstances. Kertes Weaver notes that "this disconnect comes primarily from the notion that God could do something about suffering yet chooses not to act. This divine inaction forces the question of why?"[16]

Theologians have developed a variety of responses to why God allows humanity to experience pain and suffering. Some scholars have credited Augustine of Hippo with being the first to attempt to answer (or defend) the problem of evil on behalf of the church. His theodicy, based on Genesis chapter three and Romans 5:12-20, affirmed that humans were created with free will and that sin and death are the result of Adam and Eve's disobedience. Furthermore, he viewed human suffering as the natural consequence of the abuse of free will and thus argued that God is justified in not intervening during

[15] Coe, "Musing on the Dark Night of the Soul," 307.

[16] Weaver, *Theology of Suffering*, 4.

human hardships, trials, and adversity.[17] Theologians who support Augustine's theodicy have also argued that true free will would not exist if God intervened when sin and wrongdoing occurred.

Conversely, Irenaeus held a perspective on theodicy, often referred to as soul-making, that views struggle and suffering as necessary for the moral and character development of humanity. Nathaniel Holmes notes that Irenanen theodicy "argues that human beings were created imperfectly for a divine purpose, namely so that human freedom could be fully actualized."[18] In *Pathways in Theodicy*, Mark Scott uses the analogy of parenting children to explain how adversity, pain, and suffering can be a part of God's purposes for humanity.[19] He also points to John Hick's work in *Evil and the God of Love*, where Hicks writes "We have to recognize that the presence of pain cannot be the supreme and overriding end of which the world exists. Rather, this world must be a place of soul-making. And its value is to be judged, not primarily by the quantity of pleasure and pain occurring in it at any particular moment, but by its fitness for its primary purpose, the purpose of soul-making."[20]

Patrick Sherry contends that both Augustine and Irenaeus appeal to free will as the "inevitable result of human freedom."[21] Thus he views evil and sin as the price paid

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[17] Patrick Sherry, "Theodicy," Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/theodicy-theology.

[18] Nathaniel Holmes, "Redemptive Suffering and Christology in African American Christian Theology," *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium* 4, no. 11 (2010): 102.

[19] Mark S. M. Scott, "Soul-Making Theodicy: No Pain, No Gain," in *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 102-103.

[20] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 259.

[21] Patrick Sherry, "Theodicy," Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/theodicy-theology.

for freedom. Another perspective posits that suffering, evil, and daily trials are temporary realities, and that God will end these experiences in the final judgment. Additionally, there are others who surrender to the mystery of God and believe that humanity will not fully understand God's plan for pain and suffering on this side of time.

While viewpoints may differ, theologians agree that pain and suffering can raise theological questions for a Believer. At the heart of these inquiries is the struggle with the goodness, power, silence, and even the heart of God. In 1710, German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz wrote *Theodicy* and is credited with creating the term from the Greek words *theos* (God) and *dikē* (justice) as an explanation to defend or justify God in the face of evil.[22] Nathaniel Holmes describes theodicy as "the attempt to validate the goodness, power, and/or providential care of God in the face of horrendous evils."[23] Existential theodicy seeks to provide answers for those who are plagued with questions such as why am I suffering at this time or in this way? Can this pain have any good purpose? Will God leave me alone? Does God love me? Instead of focusing on why God allows evil, existential theodicy shifts to what humans can do to endure and manage the trials, pain, or suffering that they face. This allows Christians to focus on the tools that they have at their disposal such as prayer, faith, worship, and the sacraments.

In their work *Between Pain and Grace*, Peterman and Schmutzer propose that "Christians have access to existing truths in Scripture that wait to be discovered."[24] However, they warn that when it comes to issues of pain, suffering, context and life-

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[22] Patrick Sherry, "Theodicy," Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/theodicy-theology.

[23] Holmes, "Redemptive Suffering," 99.

[24] Gerald Peterman and Andrew Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace: A Biblical Theology of Suffering* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2016), 11.

setting matters. As a result, much of the Old Testament contextualizes suffering through the lens of the author's covenantal relationship with God. As such, heavy emphasis is placed on enduring well through trust and devotion to God. By contrast, the New Testament writers had the benefit of Jesus' life on earth and the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, they viewed themselves as partners in Christ's suffering.

In their article, "Understanding Theodicy and Anthropodicy in the Perspective of Job," authors Daliman, Suparti, Gumelar, Tari, and Wijaya use Job as a case study to re-examine and present alternative thoughts about theodicy. They conclude that suffering and adversity are not necessarily a result of God's displeasure or human transgression, and God's holy silence is not always an indication of divine wrath. Hence, their research focused on the human response to suffering and lifted Job as an example of one who resisted the urge or tendency to surrender and give up. They write "God gave humans the right to protest, like Job, against their suffering. People suffering have the right to scream, and their cries must be taken seriously."[25]

It is worth noting that Peterman and Schmutzer also highlight and normalize the large volume of protest from Old Testament writers that struggled with theodicy. "Coping with suffering and speaking to God about it is not an event to be logged but a discipline to be nourished in speech. The Psalter offers a sanctuary of sighs and song."[26] Indeed, the Book of Psalms is filled with writings of protest where Believers pour out their frustrations and complaints to God. "If the performance of praise exalts and affirms,

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[25] M. Daliman, H. Sulastri, F. Gumelar, E. Tari, and H. Wijaya, "Understanding Theodicy and Anthropodicy in the Perspective of Job and its Implications for Human Suffering," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78, no. 1 (2022): 4, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7679.

[26] Peterman and Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace*, 123.

the performance of lament names and transforms. Without pain, praise is 'thin' and halfhearted; but without praise, the pain seems fatal and unbearable."[27] Peterman and Schmutzer suggest that our laments help us to acknowledge our weakness, sins, or even the sadness that God did not stop whatever pains us. When we lament, we "join a faith of honest conversation with God."[28] This level of honesty with God is an important part of our spiritual journey and maturation.

The Old Testament writers were wounded and hurting, yet they remained rooted in their covenant with God and determined to wait on God for deliverance. Bales argues that the sovereignty of God is an "incredible reality for the Christian to rest in"[29] and reminds Believers that they can "find solace knowing that the God of the universe, the sovereign ruler of all things at all times, remembers His promises. And God has promised his redeemed that suffering does not have the final word."[30] The ontological goodness of God is what strengthens Christians in times of troubles and provides hope as they navigate their trials and adversities. Bales argues that "the goodness of God is not affected because of the bad that accompanies suffering. For the Christ-follower, it is often through the tragedy and trial of suffering that the goodness of God is seen most clearly."[31]

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[27] Peterman and Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace*, 108.

[28] Peterman and Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace*, 106.

[29] Bales, "Counted Worthy," 116.

[30] Bales, "Counted Worthy," 115.

[31] Bales, "Counted Worthy," 123.

Redemptive Suffering

The Black Church is rooted in messages of hope and the ability to display faith while enduring hardships and trials. Historically, pain and suffering has been a crushing reality for African Americans (in general) and Black Christians (in particular) living in America. Spirituals of the early church often lamented the harsh and seemingly unbearable experience of slavery. Yet, the enslaved also sang of hope during deep suffering and regularly expressed "both the extreme agonies and hope of black life in America."[32] The genius of these spirituals is in their ability to articulate the tension of belief in God while acknowledging the unknown mysteries of their daily existence. Songs such as Charles Tindley's hymn "We'll Understand it Better By and By," showcases a "deep respect for the mystery of God's purposes in suffering."[33] This tradition is carried on even today in the life and music of the Black Church.

In her book *The Power of Unearned Suffering,* Mika Edmondson posits that "the eventual triumph of good over evil remains among the most deeply cherished beliefs in the black church tradition."[34] She contends that the Black Church has advocated for "active engagement with suffering rather than the passive experience of it"[35] and points to the Black Church's prayer and music traditions that are saturated with "Christian reflection on the nature and purpose of black suffering in America."[36] Regarding the

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[32] Mika Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering: The Roots and Implications of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Theodicy* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2016), 34.

[33] Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering*, 37.

[34] Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering,* 44.

[35] Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering,* 30.

[36] Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering*, 24.

church's prayer tradition, she notes the deeply embedded "quest to make meaning out of the brutality of the black experience."[37] She also highlights the "prevailing black church paradigms such as the all-powerful God and the ultimate triumph of justice."[38]

Nathaniel Holmes agrees with Edmondson and argues that "Redemptive suffering has a long and deep history in African American theology."[39] He highlights the Black Church's frequent messages of enduring suffering for divine purposes, even when it is difficult to discern or understand the reason why. Similarly, James Cone calls attention to the hope that permeates the Black Church and embraces the notion that the longstanding troubles that have plagued the community will not have the final word. Ultimately, the Black Church's message is grounded in the belief that God will "bring about complete liberation in God's own time. Everything will eventually work out, maybe in this world, but if not, then the next world."[40]

Edmondson's book also details the journey of Martin Luther King, Sr. who was the senior pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. King, Sr. desired for his congregation to engage with suffering in a way that would "teach the surrounding culture about God's purpose for it."[41] Similarly, his son Martin Luther King, Jr. believed his ministerial duties included addressing the real-life struggles and suffering of the congregation, while advocating for justice and changes to the social order. Edmondson

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[37] Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering*, 39.

[38] Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering*, 25.

[39] Holmes, "Redemptive Suffering," 98.

[40] Holmes, "Redemptive Suffering," 108.

[41] Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering*, 30.

writes that the needs and expectations of the black church audiences pressed King to "wrestle with theodicy and to speak of God's power in a way that would resonate."[42] In his essay, "Religion's Answer to the Problem of Evil," MLK, Jr. wrote "The existence of evil in the world still stands as a great enigma wrapped in mystery, yet it has not caused the Christian to live in total despair."[43]

While pain and suffering may seem like a personal matter, they are in fact a corporate issue that impacts the entire body of Christ. The church is filled with people who are hurting, angry, depressed, scared, and struggling with their daily lives. Pastors and ministry leaders must be prepared to adequately address suffering and create safe spaces for true dialogue to occur. Furthermore, these conversations are needed beyond small group settings. Indeed, sermons, theological musings, and pastoral care should all include an acknowledgement of a Believer's pain and seasons of suffering, and the willingness to admit that our faith carries in it an element of mystery. Peterman and Schmutzer rightly argue that "suffering people benefit from being 'seen and heard' in the corporate setting."[44] They further suggest that shunned grief is "spiritual hypocrisy."[45] While it is true that pastors and ministry leaders may not be able to provide answers to all the questions that pain and suffering create, they can still point those in their care to the God who invites Believers to cast their cares upon Him (1 Ptr. 5:7).

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[42] Edmondson, *The Power of Unearned Suffering,* 47.

[43] Martin L. King Jr., "Religion's Answer to the Problem of Evil," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/religions-answer-problem-evil#.

[44] Peterman and Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace*, 125.

[45] Peterman and Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace*, 105.

Life is Hard and God is Good!

It has been said that what impresses non-believers is not how Christians handle prosperity but rather how they handle adversity. Believers may not feel the need for assistance or insight when their lives are filled with victories and joy. However, everyone will experience trials, hardships, and adversity; and Christians are no exception. They, too, will experience pain. Ultimately, mature Christians trust that God is active not only in the world around them but also in their lives. They are assured that God cares about their well-being, and they embrace the reality that while they are not in control of their lives, they are deeply loved by the One who is. Even still, when life gets tough, some Believers need guidance and spiritual support to develop "a mindset about hardship, to recover from rejection and betrayal, and to respond to persecution."[46] They need to be reminded that God uses all of our experiences - even the ones we find difficult - to grow our faith, develop our character, reveal our purpose, draw us closer to Him, and show us how we can help others.

As such, a believer's theology must make room for the reality that what God allows in our lives is also part of God's providence for us. Mark Scott suggests that "dangers, obstacles, and difficulties are necessary for our spiritual growth. Without problems and challenges, we would slide into spiritual stagnation, atrophy, apathy."[47] John Hick posits that suffering is a providential occurrence and that our experiences with heartache, grief, loss, and injustice can often lead to spiritual transformation. When

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[46] Peterman and Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace*, 278.

[47] Mark Scott, "Soul-Making Theodicy: No Pain, No Gain," in *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 105.

Believers are faced with pain, they must choose whether to run to God, or from God. Kertes Weaver rightly suggests that our problem with pain and suffering is "only a problem in light of the belief in God. Without God, it is easy to imagine a violent, natural world in which suffering is given. With God, however, suffering has to be searched and interpreted for the meaning it sheds on both divine and human existence."[48] Moreover, the "sovereignty of God is not seen in what he prevents but in his majestic ability to take the broken pieces of our lives and make something beautiful from them."[49]

Author Craig Cooper urges Christians not to "take the hard stuff of life and equate it to the heart of God as if God takes delight in our troubles."[50] When faced with difficult and unexpected situations, there is a temptation to withdraw from God, our community of faith, and even the Word. As such, we may struggle to hear God's voice or sense God's presence. Thus, it becomes imperative that we feed our faith by anchoring ourselves in the Word of God. As Christians, the Bible is our bedrock and is where we can find God's promises and encouragement for all that we face in life. Peterman and Schmutzer argue that "it is the community of faith that adds the authoritative Scripture, which invites the suffering to locate their distress within the context of shared faith."[51] Likewise, Britt Chole asserts that "choosing to saturate our thoughts with the Scriptures when we are disillusioned is evidence that our faith is based on *what is true,* not *what is felt*."[52]

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[48] Weaver, *Theology of Suffering,* 12.

[49] Peterman and Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace*, 201.

[50] Craig Cooper, "God's Mercies Are New Every Morning," Bible.com, https://www.bible.com/reading-plans/44082-gods-mercies-are-new-every-morning-a-5-day-devotion.

[51] Peterman and Schmutzer, *Between Pain and Grace*, 24.

[52] Chole, *The Night Is Normal,* 94.

Consequently, what we believe matters. A strong theological foundation enables Christians to remain engaged with their faith and their community of faith during challenging times. The presence of adversity, loss, grief, tragedy, and even death does not mean the absence of God. A maturing faith understands that God can handle our pain. Christians can trust God with their hurting hearts. God will listen, and God understands when people cry out in pain or frustration. Christians do not have to suppress their emotions in the presence of God. They can use prayers of lament when they are disillusioned and journeying through trying times. Hopefully, they will eventually arrive at the place where they choose to exercise trust and patience in God, even as they seek to understand their circumstances. Keartes Weaver posits that "the manner in which we suffer and also care for the suffering of others reveals a great deal about who we are and how adequate our religious belief systems are for support in the journey. Sometimes suffering helps us arrive at better beliefs."[53]

Spiritual Fortitude

Life is messy. Christians must allow for lamenting and create safe spaces where Believers can honestly and openly share their hurts, disappointments, and confusion. Daliman et al say it best "Questioning God's actions is entirely different from blaspheming or cursing God. When a suffering person questions God's omnipotence and justice with the same desire as Job - longing for the Almighty's answer (31:35) - indeed, the suffering person will experience an encounter with God and be comforted in his or

[53] Kertes Weaver, *Theology of Suffering*, 13.

her suffering."[54] Britt Chole, normalizes disillusionment by suggesting that "Because disillusionment is not all loss. Losing an illusion opens the way to gaining a reality. Removing false ideas clears a path to finding truer ideas. The soul-deep sadness of disillusionment challenges and then refines and purifies our beliefs with the fire of Truth."[55] However, she does caution that "even though the night is normal, a lack of tools can make it longer and thicker than it needs to be."[56]

Thus, cultivating spiritual fortitude can serve as a protective factor against suffering and create a theological framework for Believers. Spiritual Fortitude allows Christians to sift their emotions and perspective through their faith and enables them to endure their trials with resolve and faith in God. Britt Chole suggests that "intellect alone is a poor guide" when navigating nighttime experiences. Likewise, scripture invites Christians to trust in the Lord with all their hearts and lean not to their own understanding (Prov. 3:5). "In order to trust God, we must always view our adverse circumstances through the eyes of faith, not of sense."[57]

Researcher Daryl Van Tongeren suggests that spirituality and suffering are deeply intertwined. As a result of his research, he and his team are credited with developing the term Spiritual Fortitude, which they describe as the deep and authentic capacity to exercise spiritual principles during times of adversity. Spiritual Fortitude is defined as "a character trait enabling people to endure and make redemptive meaning

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[54] Daliman et al, *Understanding Theodicy*, 5.

[55] Chloe, *The Night Is Normal*, 17.

[56] Chloe, *The Night Is Normal*, 5.

[57] Bridges, *Trusting God*, 6.

from adversity through their sacred connections with God, others, and themselves."[58] Spiritual fortitude is a multifaceted construct that is comprised of three elements: spiritual endurance (actively leaning into suffering); redemptive purpose (discovering a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in the face of adversity); and spiritual enterprise (maintaining integrity and the will to live no matter what). Van Tongeren et al. view spiritual fortitude as a positive religious coping mechanism that helps individuals endure challenging circumstances. While spiritual fortitude is closely related to the psychological constructs of grit and resilience, it differs in two important aspects: 1. Grit is typically associated with enduring while working towards a long-term goal. However, individuals who exhibit spiritual fortitude persevere despite "the absence of a goal or certain desired outcome."[59] Secondly, resilience is seen as the ability to bounce back and return to a former state of being. Although closely related to resilience, spiritual fortitude "focuses more on the underlying cognitive schema that facilitates resilience and less on the outcome of persistence."[60]

Christians who exercise spiritual fortitude understand that they have sufficient strength and spiritual resources to not only endure but thrive despite their circumstances. In fact, researchers have found a positive relationship between spiritual fortitude and an individual's well-being. Instead of becoming angry, feeling punished, or even abandoned by God, Christians with high levels of spiritual fortitude are committed to their decision

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[58] D. R. Tongeren, J. D. Aten, S. McElroy, D. E. Davis, L. Shannonhouse, E. B. Davis, and J. N. Hook, "Development and Validation of a Measure of Spiritual Fortitude," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 11, no. 6 (2019): 588.

[59] Jacob Kranendonk, "Spiritual Fortitude, Spiritual Struggles, Attachment to God and Faith Maturity: An Exploratory Study," (Diss., Abilene Christian University, Abilene, 2022), 10, Digital Commons @ACU, Electronic Theses and Dissertations.

[60] Kranendonk, "Spiritual Fortitude," 10.

to endure trials and interpret adversity with resolve and faith in God. Van Tongeren et al. contend that spiritual fortitude helps individuals "transcend a self-focused perspective."[61] In fact, spiritual fortitude is viewed as the product of a matured and developed faith. As such, individuals with high levels of spiritual fortitude are intentional about tapping into their faith resources. Moreover, what they cannot access or achieve in their own strength, they surrender to their Helper, the Holy Spirit, who ensures that they are never alone or without the power to endure with God's help. This is a necessary response to trials and obstacles that helps the Believer buffer the temptation to allow their adversity to create a faith crisis, which could further complicate their situation.

In the life of a Believer, no experience is wasted. Regardless of the circumstances or adversity that we face, God can redeem our pain and our suffering. Hamilton and Fluker maintain that "in the pain and agony of suffering, individuals have the ability to turn the experience into something profound and meaningful."[62] Instead of becoming frustrated by the challenges of life, Christians can choose to see this as an opportunity to grow, stretch, and rise to the next level. Indeed, there are lessons to be learned and growth opportunities that can arise from the adverse conditions we face. In some cases, our purpose and ministry will be birthed from the painful experiences of our lives. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and sharing the painful parts of our story can help us and others grow in faith.

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[61] Van Tongeren et al, "Measure of Spiritual Fortitude," 590.

[62] Jill Hamilton and Walter Fluker, "An Exploration of Suffering and Spirituality Among African American Cancer Patients as Guided by Howard Thurman's Theological Perspective on Spirituality," *Journal of Religion and Health* 60, no. 4 (2021): 2823.

The Apostle Paul understood this well and often shared his experiences with the growing body of believers. In his letter to the Church in Corinth, he penned that God "comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God" (2 Cor. 1:4). While in prison in Rome, he wrote "Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear" (Phil. 1:12-14). This is how we not only grow in our faith but also encourage others who may be facing their own trials and tribulations. When we approach our adversity with the right theological perspective, we can share Paul's testimony that "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:8,9) and we can take joy in Jesus' declaration that "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (Jn. 16:33).

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATION

Introduction

Frustration, disappointment, and adversity happens to all of us. It does not matter your gender, race, socioeconomic status, or professed beliefs; if you are living, you will encounter some type of trial or hardship. Unexpected illness, natural disasters, job furlough, and grief are all examples of challenges that create stress in an individual's life. If left unchecked, stress and adversity can have a profoundly negative impact on an individual's overall well-being. Thankfully, there is good news. While trials and challenges can feel overwhelming, these circumstances will eventually pass. Individuals who successfully navigate these challenging times are often described as resilient.

Resilience is defined as the ability to bounce back or recover from adversity. While the concept of resilience originated in the physical sciences, it gained traction within the social sciences in the latter half of the twentieth century. Psychologists were intrigued by young people who were able to transcend their circumstances despite their surroundings and the adversity they faced. Instead of succumbing to their environment, these young people exhibited adaptability and growth. Thus, the birth of resilience research and the quest to identify and replicate the characteristics of resilient people.

In the *Routledge International Handbook of Psychosocial Resilience*, Swati Mukherjee and Updesh Kumar describe resilience as "the ability of an individual or a

system to recover from a setback, adapt well in the face of trauma, and survive and thrive despite significant adversity and stress."[1] They characterize resilience as "an umbrella term covering markers of adaptive functioning under adverse circumstances."[2] Most researchers view resiliency as a skill and not a personality trait. Zlotnick, Manor-Lavon, and Srulovici suggest that learning how to react and adapt to life's challenges and stressors is a key component of resilience. Mukherjee and Kumar agree with this assessment, arguing that resilience is a process rather than an inherent attribute. As such, it is something that can be taught and cultivated in an individual's life.

Although trials, adversity, and painful situations are inevitable, some have suggested that suffering is optional. Resilient individuals strive to do more than merely survive life's trials. Instead, they find ways to pivot, adjust, and thrive despite the difficulties they may face. Cultivating resilience enables individuals to proactively identify preferred strategies for facing adversity, rather than waiting for life's challenges to disrupt their world. Resilient individuals endure adversity by accessing their internal and external resources. These resources can include family support, friend circles, faith practices, and connecting with a religious community. Resilient individuals are also known to have a more positive or hopeful perspective regarding their challenges and will reframe their circumstances to protect their mental and emotional health. Furthermore, resilient individuals tend to report positive coping skills and flexibility when faced with challenges and adversity.

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[1] Swati Mukherjee and Updesh Kumar, "Psychological Resilience," *The Routledge International Handbook of Psychological Resilience* (London, UK: Routledge International Handbooks, 2017), 3.

[2] Mukherjee and Kumar, "Psychological Resilience," 6.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unexpected worldwide stressor that impacted lives in ways the world had never seen before. The closure of businesses and schools, social distancing, and the shift to virtual connectedness created new challenges for youth and young adults. Facing adversity and the inescapable challenges of life can shake a young person's high hopes for adulthood, as well as their confidence in their ability to navigate life's vicissitudes. Moreover, research shows that the hardships and challenges created by the pandemic have negatively impacted the mental and emotional health of this age group. As a result, cultivating resilience in young people has become essential for equipping them with positive coping skills, a hopeful perspective, and protective resources for weathering the storms of life.

Resilience Theory

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines resilience as the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, tragedy, threats, trauma, or significant sources of stress. While resilience is often characterized as an individual's ability to bounce back, the APA also suggests that resilience often produces "profound personal growth" for these individuals.[3] In fact, they found that resilient people are "more likely to learn lessons from traumatic encounters rather than get overwhelmed by them."[4] They also identified other benefits of successfully managing adversity that included greater

[3] David Palmiter, M. Alvord, R. Dorlen, L. Comas-Diaz, S. Luthar, S. Maddi, H.K. O'Neill, K.W. Saakvitne, and R.G. Tedeschi, "Building Your Resilience," American Psychological Association, https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/building-your-resilience.

[4] David Palmiter, M. Alvord, R. Dorlen, L. Comas-Diaz, S. Luthar, S. Maddi, H.K. O'Neill, K.W. Saakvitne, and R.G. Tedeschi, "Building Your Resilience," American Psychological Association, https://www.apa.org/topics/resilience/building-your-resilience.

appreciation for life, new or enriched relationships, deepened spiritual beliefs and practices, and increased belief in a person's ability to endure.

It is important to note that the APA views resilience as an ordinary (rather than extraordinary) skillset involving behaviors, thoughts, and actions that anyone can learn and develop. It is believed that everyone has some degree of resilience and that your level of resilience can improve as you successfully navigate each challenge. As such, the APA recommends that people focus on building connections, fostering wellness, finding purpose, and embracing healthy thoughts.

Dr. Elizabeth Scott posits that resilience has benefits for tackling daily stressors as well as enduring "rare major catastrophes."[5] In fact research suggests that people who manage minor daily obstacles easily can often handle major stressors with greater ease. Thus, learning to navigate and overcome life's stressors is an essential component of resilience. Cultivating resilience is seen as a journey that is unique to everyone. Eric Barber notes that while people tend to have a preferred way of managing life's difficulties, extremely resilient people are flexible and use a variety of strategies to deal with stressful situations.

Resilient people believe in their ability to manage and overcome difficult or challenging situations. Stephanie Massicotte posits that individuals with a resilient identity possess an internalized message of resilience that includes their belief that they are "capable of adapting positively in the face of adversity which is reflected in one's

[5] Elizabeth Scott, "Why Emotional Resilience Is A Trait You Can Develop," Very Well Mind, https://www.verywellmind.com/emotional-resilience-is-a-trait-you-can-develop-3145235.

selfhood and actions."[6] Their resilient mindset helps them remember what has worked for them in the past and draw on lessons learned from previous difficult experiences. As a result, they are quick to access their coping skills and strategies to help them manage adversity. Moreover, Massicotte contends that "resilience can be integrated within one's concept of self and consequently influence one's perceptions, actions, and relationships not only with oneself but also with others and one's environment."[7]

Collective Resilience

Resilience is not merely an individual attribute but can also be seen as a community asset. Although resilience research initially focused on individual capacity, a growing body of work is now being conducted on collective resilience. Collective resilience explores and investigates how communities can survive and thrive in the face of adversity. Chris Cocking notes that community bonds are created and even strengthened through collective resilience from "the shared experience of facing a common threat."[8] Cocking also maintains that "empowered collective action becomes more likely, as those affected begin to engage in co-operative and/or altruistic behavior."[9]

For African Americans living in the United States of America, resilience is not merely a concept but also part of their collective identity and narrative of survival. From

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[6] Stephanie Massicotte, "A Resilient Identity: Myth or Reality?" in *Fostering Resilience Before, During, and After Experiences of Trauma: Insights to Inform Practice Across the Lifetime (Explorations in Mental Health)*, eds. Buuma Maisha, Stephanie Massicotte, and Melanie Morin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 107.

[7] Massicotte, "A Resilient Identity," 109.

[8] Chris Cocking, "Collective Resilience and Social Support in the Face of Adversity," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Psychosocial Resilience,* ed. Updesk Kumar (London, UK: Routledge International Handbooks, 2017), 114.

[9] Cocking, "Collective Resilience," 115.

the moment captured Africans arrived on American soil, this community and their descendants have experienced systemic challenges that created tremendous levels of stress and adversity. Although these conditions greatly impacted their physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being, African Americans nurtured hope and held a communal regard for each other that transcended their harsh reality. Shanna Ossé and Stephanie Massicotte note that "resilience has been stitched into the fabric of the Black Community."[10] As a result, they have individually and collectively cultivated an existence of resilience that has included protective factors such as belief systems, ways of being, organizational patterns, as well as social, educational, and political resources that helped maintain and sustain their existence. Leslie Hollingsworth also highlighted researched characteristics of resilient Black families that included "rituals to help with transitioning through adversity and remaining connected…memories to validate their experience and the sense of who they were in the midst of adversity…gratitude and humility to help themselves reframe the adversity…and dreams and clairvoyant experiences to resolve the grief associated with their experience of adversity."[11]

While it is true that members of the Black Community were not able to control the oppressive and unjust circumstances of their daily lives, the community has taken great pride in rigorously managing the aspects that were within their control. Thus, they attempted to mitigate the impact of their conditions by maintaining a positive outlook on the future, cultivating a strong faith and faith community, and viewing adversity as a

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[10] Shanna Ossé and Stephanie Massicotte, "The Narrative of Resilience Through Social Media in the Black Community," in *Fostering Resilience Before, During, and After Experiences of Trauma: Insights to Inform Practice Across the Lifetime. (Explorations in Mental Health)*, eds. Buuma Maisha, Stephanie Massicotte, and Melanie Morin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2021), 182.

[11] Leslie Hollingsworth, "Resilience in Black Families," *Handbook of Family Resilience* (New York, NY: Springer, 2012), 233.

challenge that could be overcome. To be clear, collective resilience does not absolve a society of its responsibility to remove oppressive and discriminatory practices. In fact, Cocking rightly argues that "critiques of resilience raise some legitimate concerns about how the concept can be misused in ways that could negatively impact upon long-term individual and community well-being."[12] Nevertheless, the Black Community remains a prime example of collective resilience and the ingenuity and determination of its members to thrive despite the lack of resources, plethora of obstacles, and profound injustices they endured.

Emotional Resilience

Kristen Webb Wright defines emotional resilience as "an individual's capacity to adapt and rebound from stressful or challenging situations, demonstrating the ability to maintain psychological and emotional well-being despite adversity, trauma, or significant life changes."[13] Webb Wright notes that individuals without adequate coping skills can find themselves struggling in all areas of their life. She suggests that emotional resilience helps an individual maintain meaningful bonds with others, as well as protects them from stress-related illnesses, which ultimately improves their overall well-being. However, she warns that emotionally resilient people are not immune from trials and adversity. Instead, they are equipped with the tools and ability to effectively navigate life's stressors and recover from setbacks, all while maintaining a positive outlook on life.

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[12] Cocking, "Collective Resilience," 118.

[13] Kristen Webb Wright, "Fifteen Ways to Cultivate Emotional Resilience," Day One App, https://dayoneapp.com/blog/emotional-resilience/.

Dr. Scott suggests that emotional resilience is not a skill that a person does or does not have; rather, there are "varying degrees of how well a person can handle stress."[14] She believes that emotionally resilient people tend to be emotionally aware, willing to persevere when faced with challenges, are generally optimistic, and view obstacles as opportunities that can make them stronger. She also notes that resilient individuals value social support and are often connected to supportive friends and family.

Madhuleena Roy Chowdhury suggests that emotional resilience is present at birth and that proper knowledge, training, and motivation help to enhance this resilience throughout one's life. She advocates for resilience training that can help individuals develop a desire to persevere when life gets tough. For her, emotional resilience is "an art of living that is entwined with self-belief, self-compassion, and enhanced cognition."[15]

Emotional resilience enables individuals to remain hopeful in the face of challenges, making it easier for them to find solutions to their problems. Eric Barber argues that truly resilient individuals can strike a balance between a positive outlook and a realistic view of the world. Their positive perspective remains even in the face of setbacks and unexpected adversity. Courtney Telloian believes that building emotional resilience takes time and offers tips on developing the skill. Her advice includes seeking and maintaining a social network, approaching (instead of avoiding) difficult situations, practicing mindfulness, and challenging irrational or problematic thoughts.[16]

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[14] Scott, "Why Emotional Resilience," 23.

[15] Madhuleena Roy Chowdhury, "What is Emotional Resilience? (+6 Proven Ways to Build It)," Positive Psychology, https://positivepsychology.com/emotional-resilience/.

[16] Courtney Telloian, "Eight Ways to Become Emotionally Resilient," PsychCentral, https://psychcentral.com/health/tips-for-becoming-emotionally-resilient.

Resilience in Emerging Adulthood

Young adulthood has traditionally been recognized as the time immediately following adolescence (between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five years old). However, in the early 2000s, Jeffrey J. Arnett proposed the developmental term emerging adulthood to describe the age span of eighteen to twenty-nine-years-old. He characterized this time as full of changes and exploration and deemed it to be a critical developmental period in the lives of young individuals. This transitional time for young people involves moving "from a relatively structured and contained role in adolescence to a relative lack of structure or institutional support in emerging adulthood."[17] Therefore, emerging adulthood involves establishing one's own identity and independence from one's family, exploring school and career opportunities, and seeking financial stability and self-sufficiency. Friendships, romantic relationships, and socializing with peers are also important aspects of this time. Lastly, emerging adulthood is the time when an individual's worldview and personal ideologies begin to form and take root. Arnett contends, "Emerging adulthood is a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course."[18] As such, the focus of this developmental period is to successfully transition into becoming a self-sufficient adult. Self-sufficiency is attained

[17] Meredith O'Connor, Ann V. Sanson, John W. Toumbourou, Mary T. Hawkins, Primrose Letcher, Paige Williams, and Craig Olsson, "Positive Development and Resilience in Emerging Adulthood," in *The Oxford Handbook of Emerging Adulthood,* ed. Jeffrey Jensen Arnett (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2015), 602.

[18] Jeffrey J. Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development From the Late Teens Through the Twenties," in *American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (2000): 469.

when they accept responsibility for themselves, routinely make independent decisions, have adopted their own system of values and beliefs, and are financially stable.[19]

While emerging adulthood can be filled with exciting opportunities and milestones, it can also be seen as an unpredictable or even tumultuous time in life. In fact, emerging adults have reported feelings of frustration as they no longer see themselves as teenagers, but also do not view themselves entirely as functional adults. The uncertainty of this transitional period coupled with life's challenges and daily stressors have the potential to cause young people to struggle mentally and emotionally. As a result, some researchers have expressed concern that this age group is more prone to developing mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. Similarly, researchers have emphasized the "critical need to prioritize research that facilitates a better understanding of risk and protective factors against depression and anxiety disturbances during emerging adulthood and to translate this information to enhance well-being and to promote developmental success in young populations."[20]

The COVID-19 virus swept across the planet and ultimately became a global pandemic and chronic stressor for the world's population. Children, adolescents, and emerging adults were particularly impacted and vigorously fought to adjust to the disruptions in their daily routines. Additionally, many were concerned about the pandemic's impact on their educational and career aspirations. Emerging Adults have been known to struggle with tolerating uncertain circumstances, so it was no surprise that

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[19] Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood," 473.

[20] Patricia Mecha, Nuria Martin-Romero, and Alvaro Sanchez-Lopez, "Associations Between Social Support Dimensions and Resilience Factors and Pathways of Influence in Depression and Anxiety Rates in Young Adults," *The Spanish Journal of Psychology* 26, no. 11 (2023): 2.

many in this age group reported a decline in their mental and emotional well-being at the height of the pandemic.

Social media is a big part of our culture and oftentimes a daily part of a young person's life. Content on these platforms often features people laughing, celebrating, traveling near and far, and having a good time with friends and family. Without a proper perspective, many young people can mistakenly believe that life for others is easier and that there is something wrong with their experiences of stress and adversity. Unfortunately, the pandemic created an increased reliance on social media, which was often the only way to foster connection during the shutdown. This increased usage coincided with an alarming number of young people reporting a sharp decline in their mental and emotional well-being. As a result, in 2021, the U. S. Surgeon General declared a mental health crisis among this age group and provided guidance and action steps specifically targeted to address the concern.[21] Thus, cultivating resilience in emerging adults has become a critical task and focus of research for this age group. Sophie Leontopoulou recommends strategies for emerging adults that "focus on maintaining resilience, by introducing skills and enhancing already existing individual and relational resources they may possess."[22] Research confirms the importance of social connectedness and found that emerging adults who are deemed resilient tend to have a strong social support system, which aids in their mental well-being.

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[21] Vivek H. Murthy, *Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021), https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo172822.

[22] Sophie Leontopoulou, "Aftermath of the COVID-19 Pandemic: Resilience and Mental Health of Emerging Adult University Students," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 6911 (2023): 15, https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20206911.

Building Resilience

Stress can be detrimental to a person's mental, physical, and spiritual health. Resilient individuals manage stress more effectively and can bounce back from adversity. Research suggests that everyone exhibits some level of resilience in at least one domain of their life. Furthermore, it is believed that everyone can enhance their resilience in areas where they lack these skills. Buuma Maisha asserts that learning skills associated with resilience can serve as a buffer to protect that individual's mental health during times of distress. As such, articles and suggestions for building resilience are plentiful. Some of the most frequently recommended tips include managing your thoughts, maintaining an attitude of gratitude, remaining flexible, incorporating healthy behaviors, seeking meaning and purpose during difficult times, staying connected to sacred and spiritual practices, and cultivating connections and support.

In managing our thoughts, we learn that our thoughts influence and impact our behavior. Negative self-talk can impact a person's self-esteem and prevent them from feeling capable and resilient. Kristin Webb Wright emphasizes the importance of positive self-talk and found that uplifting and encouraging internal dialogue positively contributes to emotional resilience. A resilient mindset also requires that individuals resist the urge to feel hopeless and defeated. Resilient individuals view obstacles and challenges as opportunities for growth and learning. This ability to reframe one's way of thinking allows the person to move beyond feelings of frustration and despair regarding their circumstances. Researchers recommend that people quickly reframe negative thoughts and focus instead on identifying strengths, solutions, and support. Additionally, Seema Mehrotra and Ravikesh Tripathi suggest that "positive reinterpretations of adversities

based on one's spiritual framework may generate positive emotions."[23] Finally, cultivating a resilient mindset also includes allowing for a shift in perspective. Resilient people allow space for growth and changes in mindset regarding circumstances and people and are open to the possibility that there is another way to view or assess a situation.

Researchers have found that maintaining an attitude of gratitude can be beneficial when life becomes more difficult. A popular quote from Melody Beattie advises that "Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today and creates a vision for tomorrow."[24] Chowdhury, notes that a "lack of gratitude stops us from moving forward and brings down our strength to recoil."[25] J. C. Awani cites research that "grateful people were found to be happier, less depressed, less stressed, and more satisfied with their lives and social relationships, which form a fertile platform for psychosocial resilience."[26] Webb Wright contends that gratitude and appreciation for the important things in life can create resilience when adversity and challenges emerge.

As we explore remaining flexible, it has been said that the only constant in life is change. As such, the ability to adapt to unexpected, unfamiliar, and challenging circumstances is a necessary skill of resilience. In fact, research confirms that flexible thinking is essential in the mental and emotional well-being of resilient people. While

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[23] Seema Mehrotra and Ravikesh Tripathi, "Spirituality and Resilience," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Psychological Resilience* (London, UK: Routledge International Handbooks, 2017), 219.

[24] Brainy Quote, "Melody Beattie Quotes," Brainy Quotes, https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/melody_beattie_134462.

[25] Chowdhury, "What is Emotional Resilience?"

[26] J. C. Ajawani, "Spiritual Intelligence," *The Routledge International Handbook of Psychological Resilience* (London, UK: Routledge International Handbooks, 2017), 179.

change can be uncomfortable or downright scary, it can also produce growth, new perspectives, and a new skill set for an individual. Therefore, teaching flexibility and tolerance for uncertainty is considered a key component in nurturing resilience among emerging adults. “If you don’t like change, you’re not alone. But if you want to be more resilient, embracing the fact that things are constantly changing is key.”[27]

Incorporating healthy behaviors includes eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly, and getting six to eight hours of sleep on a regular basis. Webb Wright argues that “when you are tired, hungry, or sick, you must work much harder to manage your emotions and bounce back from a challenge.”[28] Moreover, resilience research has shown that regularly incorporating self-care practices can have a profound positive impact on a person’s mental and emotional well-being. While self-care can mean different things to different people, it can include setting boundaries to avoid burnout and saying “no” to things you do not want to do. Self-care can also involve periodically disconnecting from electronics and social media. In this age of constant connectedness, going “off-the-grid” has been found to be a positive practice for those seeking to rest and reset from the hectic pace of daily life.

In times of uncertainty, people often seek purpose and try to make meaning out of their circumstances. During a 2019 research study of flood survivors, researchers found that “divine attachment security facilitated emotional processing and spiritual mean-making, including God’s providence and benevolence.”[29] In addition, adversity,

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[27] Kristen Webb Wright, “Fifteen Ways to Cultivate Emotional Resilience,” Day One App, https://dayoneapp.com/blog/emotional-resilience/.

[28] Kristen Webb Wright, “Fifteen Ways to Cultivate Emotional Resilience,” Day One App, https://dayoneapp.com/blog/emotional-resilience/.

challenges, and life stressors have caused many individuals to re-examine or alter their theodicies of suffering. Research suggests that people who find purpose and meaningful connections despite their challenging circumstances are often more hopeful, which predisposes them to be resilient.

Studies have shown that people who identify as spiritual or religious have found comfort in their faith practices during times of stress and adversity. Researchers have found that despite feelings of frustration, anger, and even confusion, individuals navigating disasters and tragedies are often "motivated to seek experiential closeness to whatever they deem sacred as a means of comfort and support."[30] This can include practices such as prayer, meditation, mindfulness, worship, and maintaining a connection with a faith community.

Despite our culture's preoccupation with individual achievements and self-reliance, we are social beings that thrive on positive and meaningful social connections. Some people tend to isolate during times of distress. However, research shows a positive correlation between social support and resilience to stress. Webb Wright suggests that "Being strong doesn't mean you don't need others."[31] Resilient people are not afraid to ask for and accept help from others, especially when it comes from people within their community of support. Research confirms that a strong social network can help a person feel more confident in their ability to overcome stress and adversity. Ontario University

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[29] Laura E. Captari, Laura Shannonhouse, Jamie D. Aten, and Jordan D. Snyder, "Building Spiritual Fortitude and Resilience Following Disaster: Synthesizing the Contributions of Positive Psychology and Religion/Spirituality," in *Handbook of Positive Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality*, eds. Edward B. Davis Everett L. Worthington, Jr., and Sarah A. Schnitker (Springer, IL: Nature, 2023), 483.

[30] Captari et al, "Building Spiritual Fortitude," 483.

[31] Kristen Webb Wright, "Fifteen Ways to Cultivate Emotional Resilience," Day One App, https://dayoneapp.com/blog/emotional-resilience/.

Professor Jennie Phillips contends that "building strong interpersonal relationships widens our vision - it changes the way we see the world and ourselves."[32] Madhuleena Roy Chowdhury posits that "having good personal relationships is both a by-product and a requisite for emotional resilience."[33] Resilient people tend to have strong support networks that they look to when they need encouragement, guidance, and support.

Resilience is the product of many protective factors. Mukherjee and Kumar define protective factors as "an asset or system that mediates the effect of risk factors by lessening their impact on the individual or the system under threat and that aids in positive adaptation."[34] While identifying protective factors may vary from person to person, research has confirmed group membership, including strong social and family ties, has a positive correlation to resilience. Mukherjee and Kumar do warn that while an individual may exhibit resilience in one domain of their life, it may not necessarily translate into resilience in other areas of their life. Therefore, cultivating a lifestyle of resilience, which includes identifying protective factors and support systems, is strongly encouraged.

Conclusion

Emotional and spiritual struggles are common for individuals that are confronted with obstacles that challenge their previously held beliefs about life and God. Research

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[32] Jennie Phillips, "Linking Interpersonal Relationships With Resilience," Jennie Phillips, http://www.jenniephillips.com/linking-interpersonal-relationships-with-resilience/

[33] Chowdhury, "What Is Emotional Resilience," PossitivePsychology.com, https://positivepsychology.com/emotional-resilience/.

[34] Swati Mukherjee and Updesh Kumar, "Psychological Resilence: A Conceptual Review of Theory and Research," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Psychosocial Resilience*, edited by Updesk Kumar (London, UK: Routledge International Handbooks, 2017), 7.

suggests that this is especially true for emerging adults, who typically experience changes in their worldviews. Beliefs such as the notion that bad things do not happen to good people or that life will be easier because I am a person of faith can lead to disillusionment and devastating distress for individuals trying to navigate unexpected tragedies, disasters, or adversity. In times of crisis, researchers have noted that "survivors draw on their faith as they attempt to reconcile global meanings with painful disaster's effects, often reducing dissonance by altering or expanding theodicies of suffering."[35]

Faith is viewed as a valuable asset that can positively impact a person's emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. Researchers have found that individuals with spiritual and religious beliefs possess more adaptive coping responses, a more optimistic life orientation, greater perceived social support, lower levels of anxiety, and, consequently, higher resilience. Resilient individuals who report a strong spiritual foundation tend to feel more confident in their ability to overcome adversity and manage the daily stresses of life. They are often able to use their faith and spiritual beliefs to interpret their trials and adversity from a spiritual perspective. This ability helps these individuals to display their resilient nature by remaining hopeful despite their circumstances. Moreover, research has found that membership in a community of faith can help strengthen a person's resolve, especially when faced with obstacles and challenges. Having the time and space to process these events with a trusted community can aid in a person's ability to mentally, emotionally, and spiritually process their experiences. This provides an awesome opportunity for the Christian community to walk with people that are navigating adversity, to assist them with spiritual reorientation, and

[35] Captari et al, "Building Spiritual Fortitude," 483.

to provide a biblical perspective on adversity and challenges. Research supports this notion, finding that providing opportunities for individuals to debrief and discuss their stressful situations can promote growth, contemplation, and reflection. Ultimately, these exchanges can foster a new perspective and a more nuanced way of conceptualizing adversity, stress, and challenges.

Resilience Through Spiritual Fortitude

While the concept of resilience is a noble and necessary one, Christians facing trials and adversity may need more than resilience to endure. Thus, cultivating spiritual fortitude becomes a vital part of the spiritual formation process. According to researchers, the heart of spiritual fortitude is the ability to cope with long-suffering. Unlike resilience, which emphasizes recovery time from adversity, spiritual fortitude emphasizes the value of endurance. Resilience encourages individuals to push through challenges until they bounce back to their normal life. Spiritual Fortitude argues that there is a purpose and lessons to be learned during adversity. Most importantly, spiritual fortitude provides a framework and perspective for enduring even when a positive outcome or timeframe is not guaranteed. Finally, researchers suggest that spiritual fortitude alleviates the pressure to "bounce back" and enables people to accept that their circumstances may have permanently altered them.

Fortitude is understood as the mental and emotional strength and capacity that empowers individuals to endure hardships and challenges. How we interpret our circumstances and the world around us is often closely tied to how we view ourselves. Therefore, it is essential that people of faith understand what the Bible says about them

and their life's journey. Scripture is filled with passages that provide guidance for Christians on how to maintain the proper perspective when faced with life's trials and adversity. This is especially important for young people who are solidifying their identity and independence as well as seeking to create their own resources and belief systems.

Research has shown that social and spiritual isolation can have a negative impact on a person's mental well-being. As a result, they found that people can handle stress and cope better when they ask and receive assistance from their support systems. Thus, creating safe spaces where young Christians can openly discuss their challenges and learn how to cope with and interpret their adversity is essential for their discipleship. The faith community has been empowered to support young people in developing spiritual resilience, which will enable them to navigate successfully through seasons of distress, disillusionment, and disorientation. When the Christian Community shows up for young people by meeting their tangible needs and offering guidance through difficult situations, they are literally demonstrating God's love and care for them. Furthermore, receiving support during times of distress reaffirms the value of connection and community. When people have their physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual needs met, they often have the confidence that they can access a caring community the next time they encounter challenges.

Cultivating resilience through spiritual fortitude may require practice and considerable effort. Webb Wright agrees, noting that living a life of resilience is a lifelong journey of constant growth, adaptation, and learning. Thus, she encourages individuals to "Embrace the journey, be kind to yourself during setbacks, and celebrate

the progress you make along the way."[36] Practicing resilience through spiritual fortitude encourages the individual to remember their capacity to endure hard times, access their support systems, and maintain a proper perspective while facing difficult times. Ultimately, resilience through spiritual fortitude is a lifestyle, a way of being, a core value that beckons to us all:

Don't Quit

When things go wrong as they sometimes will,
When the road you're traveling seems all uphill
When the funds are low, and the debts are high,
And you want to smile, but you have to sigh.
When care is pressing you down a bit…Rest if you must, but do not Quit!
Success is failure turned inside out. The silver tint of the clouds of doubt,
And you can never tell how close you are,
It may be near when it seems so far
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit…
It's when things go wrong that you must not quit![37]

[36] Kristen Webb Wright, "Fifteen Ways to Cultivate Emotional Resilience," Day One App, https://dayoneapp.com/blog/emotional-resilience/.

[37] Edgar A. Guest, "Don't Quit," University of Buffalo, School of Social Work, https://socialwork.buffalo.edu/resources/self-care-starter-kit/additional-self-care-resources/inspirational-materials/dont-quit.html.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

Sometimes life throws a curveball. Unexpected challenges, sudden loss, and unpredictable obstacles can upset our equilibrium and leave us with nagging questions. Some may even become frustrated when God seems silent or does not send relief from adversity and challenges. Believers must remember that Christian faith is not based on feelings. Feelings are fickle; faith is not. While feelings and faith may intersect, believers must decide which direction they will lean. Thus, the rallying cry for Christians is to trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding (Prov. 3:5). Mature believers accept the reality that God will not always respond in the way they would like. They fight the urge to allow despair to overtake them and understand that pain can have purpose, and struggles can propel them forward in their faith journey. They focus on God's presence and look for the ways that He is leading, teaching, and encouraging them through their trying seasons. For Christians, life with God and in God's will—even with trials and adversity—is better than any life without Him. Therefore, Christians should choose to view their circumstances as an invitation to go deeper and travel farther than they would have willingly gone on their own.

When tested by trials, Christians can anchor in the steadfast hope found in God's Word and promises. The Bible is full of wisdom that helps Christians develop a clear perspective on God and provides instructions for enduring life's challenges successfully. In his epistle to the early church, James encourages believers to endure well when he writes: Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything (Jas. 1:2-4). James' words of reassurance still ring true today. Young Adult Christians need not fret when adversity and trials knock on their door. Instead, James argues for a counterintuitive response: Consider it joy when you face these trials. His perspective does not suggest that Christians will be happy about the struggle; rather, believers can remain joyful because they understand that increased endurance, perseverance, and maturity are the gifts given to those who remain faithful and endure well. Moreover, Young Adult Christians can be reassured that they are not left to fend for themselves but have a Helper—the Holy Spirit—to encourage and empower them along the way.

Biblical scholars acknowledge the struggle that can emerge from balancing life's challenges with living a life of faith. Discussions about the existence of evil and why God allows suffering have given birth to theological frameworks known as theodicy and the theology of suffering. Both Theodicy and the Theology of Suffering invite believers to trust in God's character and to rely on the promises found in Scripture. Moreover, they encourage Christians to anchor their faith and view their situations as fertile ground for a deeper and more mature relationship with God.

The determination to lean into faith and trust God's sovereignty despite life's challenges has been the prevailing message of the Black Church since its inception. Slavery, adjusting to life post-emancipation, navigating the Black Codes and Jim Crow laws, and enduring the horrific trauma of widespread lynching have been trying and tumultuous experiences for African Americans. As a result, Black Christians have frequently wrestled with the duplicity of being both Black and Christian in America. The fruits of this struggle have been plentiful. From the establishment of the Black Church to the creation of timeless hymns, African American Christians have nurtured a steadfast faith, finding strength, encouragement, and the resolve to endure difficult times within their faith and faith community.

The strength to endure can also be fostered when Christians remain connected to their social support and faith community. As such, churches and the faith community serve as invaluable sources of support for individuals navigating difficult times. Creating safe spaces for honest dialogue and lament enables believers to grapple openly with the paradoxes and uncertainties of faith. This practice is vital to cultivating spiritual fortitude, both in current church members and in those seeking connection and community who may eventually join the church family.

In recent years, spiritual fortitude has garnered increased attention in the social sciences, primarily due to research led by Daryl Van Tongeren and his colleagues. They defined spiritual fortitude as a character trait that enables people to endure stressful times and derive redemptive meaning from adversity through their sacred connections with

God, others, and themselves.[1] They posit that spiritual fortitude serves as a protective factor against suffering when individuals face pain, adversity, and hardships. While the term spiritual fortitude is relatively new in the social science field, I contend that it has undergirded the message and mission of the Black Church since its inception. With that in mind, the small group Spiritual Fortitude sessions held at Mount Ararat aimed to create community, normalize adversity, and provide tools and strategies for using faith to confront life's challenges.

Methodology

This project consisted of six small group sessions held at Mount Ararat Baptist Church on Saturday mornings. Small cell groups are the DNA of the Mount Ararat congregation, and the membership has utilized them for several years as an intimate way to foster connection and spiritual growth among its members. As such, I felt that the familiarity of the small group model would work well for this project. Additionally, the small group model provides an opportunity for more discussion among the group, creates new bonds among the members, and fosters a smaller environment for people to share their vulnerabilities. My goal for the project was to recruit six to ten young adults to participate in the weekly sessions.

Before recruitment, the project flyer, introduction letter, and consent form were emailed to three ministry leaders currently working with Young Adult Ministries. I met with two of the three leaders to discuss the project, answer their questions, and request

[1] Daryl Van Tongeren et al, "Development and Validation of a Measure of Spiritual Fortitude," *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 11, no. 6 (2019): 588.

their assistance in recruiting young adults. Both ministry leaders were very receptive to the project and believed it would be of interest to the young adults they worked with.

For four weeks prior to the project's start, one of the Young Adult Ministry leaders and I sat at a recruitment table in the Fellowship Hall following weekend services. Project information was also emailed to young adults connected to the Young Adult Ministry and the Young Adult cell group, inviting them to learn more, ask questions, and sign up to participate at the registration table. Within three weeks, twelve young adults responded with interest in participating. There was also a request for a hybrid experience for participants who may not be able to attend the church for one of the sessions. During the first session, this request was presented to the group to gauge any resistance or objections. The group liked the idea of the hybrid option; thus, sessions were conducted both in person and virtually.

The first session began with group introductions, an overview of the lessons covered, and a group covenant highlighting the need for confidentiality and a safe space for sharing. Participants also completed the Spiritual Fortitude Survey (SFS-9), which served as a pre-test for the project. The session concluded with participants receiving their journals and their first journal prompt: What is a challenging situation that you have overcome in the past? What strengths or resources did you use or draw on to overcome that situation?

There was a new participant for the second session, so we began with group introductions, allowed the new participant to complete the SFS-9 pretest, and then started our review of the participant's responses to last week’s journal prompt. We then discussed the importance of our faith and explored how trials and adversity impact our

faith. We reviewed Hebrews 11:1 and discussed our theology regarding challenges and how our beliefs and understanding impact the way we interpret (or misinterpret) our experiences. We closed the session by discussing the importance of nourishing our faith with Scripture and reviewing several promises of God that can serve as a source of comfort during difficult and stressful times. The participants were given the following journal prompt as homework reflection: What is a thought pattern or limiting belief that I have that negatively impacts my resilience? Or negatively affect how I manage difficult circumstances?

Two new participants joined Session Three, so we began with introductions and allowed them to complete the SFS-9 pre-test. Afterward, we reviewed the participants' responses to last week's journal prompt. Following this, I introduced the concept of spiritual endurance. We examined James 1:2-4 as a theological framework for facing hardships and trials with perseverance and even joy. We were all delighted to highlight how James' exhortation of joy directly connected to our church's 2025 theme of Enjoying Jesus. Our conversation focused on James' encouragement for Christians to remain steadfast in their faith while enduring difficult circumstances because he believed that trials and hardships offer opportunities for growth and maturity. The homework journal prompt for this session was: How do I manage my thoughts and emotions when I am faced with trials and adversity? How will today's discussion impact how I view stress and challenges in the future?

Session four began with a review of the homework prompt and transitioned into a discussion on spiritual enterprise. The definition of Spiritual Enterprise—maintaining your integrity while enduring adversity and trials—was provided. During this session, I

emphasized James' belief that we are called to persevere through stressful times and hardships. Our conversation included the assertion that our witness as Christians can be strengthened (or damaged) by our attitude during difficult times. We also explored the importance and impact of supporting others who are experiencing hardships. The homework journal prompt given at the end of this session was: When you are navigating stressful situations, how do your values show up?

The fifth session began with a review of the prior week's journal prompt. We then welcomed our two panelists, Dr. Kelene Robinson and Jenifer Jones, for a panel discussion on spiritual fortitude that included their unique personal journeys of navigating grief and loss, trusting God despite unresolved and unexpected circumstances, and redeeming their situations for the good of others. Our discussion, which included the participants' own experiences, helped to normalize experiences of hardship and struggle and identified tools of our faith that can keep us encouraged during difficult seasons. The final homework prompt was: Which spiritual tools and disciplines can I cultivate and develop for future use?

The final session began with a review of the final journal prompt. I then led participants through an activity in which we examined each component of spiritual fortitude and shared scriptures and resources that have personally changed, impacted, or deepened our understanding of adversity and challenges. I gave each participant a sticker featuring our focal text (Jas. 1:2-4) as a visual reminder of our desire to cultivate spiritual fortitude and endure well when faced with challenges and adversity. Participants then completed the Spiritual Fortitude Survey post-test before we concluded our session with a prayer.

Implementation

The Cultivating Spiritual Fortitude small group sessions began at Mt. Ararat Baptist Church on the first Saturday of March 2025 and continued consecutively through the first Saturday of April. A detailed description of each session is listed below.

Session One

Before our first session, two individuals contacted me to let me know they were unable to attend. Heavy snow began falling an hour before the session was scheduled to start, which may have discouraged others from coming. Additionally, interested individuals were informed of a funeral at the church, which may have also deterred some from attending the initial session.

Three individuals participated in the first session. One participant had already signed the consent form. For the remaining two individuals, I reviewed the consent form before starting the session. Both provided verbal and written consent to continue with the small group sessions. I began the first session with prayer and then introduced myself along with a general overview of how the project came to be. My discussion included my belief that faith can and should sustain believers as they endure challenges and hardships. I also emphasized the importance of fellowship and utilizing community support when believers are facing struggles.

Afterward, the participants introduced themselves and answered one of the icebreaker questions:

- If your life were a movie, what genre would it be?
- What is a personal achievement that you are proud of?

- If you could pick one skill to instantly master, what would it be?

Following the introductions, we reviewed group expectations and agreed that our time together would be a safe and confidential space that fostered open and respectful discussions, mutual respect, and a supportive environment for vulnerability. Participants inquired about the possibility of participating virtually. I consented to the hybrid model, and the group agreed to the sessions being recorded to facilitate easier transcription.

The participants accessed the Spiritual Fortitude Survey via a QR code displayed on a TV monitor. Each participant responded to the nine statements that related to their personal experiences using their faith when faced with challenges and adversity. Once the pre-test was completed, I introduced the concept of spiritual fortitude and provided my personal definition of spiritual fortitude as a stubborn and unrelenting determination to remain anchored in faith despite adversity and hardships. In addition, I shared my belief that adults need villages too and emphasized the importance of surrounding oneself with a community of believers for encouragement and support.

The group discussed the significance of trusting God's heart, even when His actions are not immediately understood. This led to the introduction of our focus text, James 1:2-4, as the biblical foundation for our discussions on spiritual fortitude. Participants then shared their personal experiences of overcoming challenging situations.

Our conversation naturally led to further discussion on the intersection of faith and emotional health. Everyone agreed that there is a learning curve to balancing faith and feelings, which emphasized the importance of filtering emotions through faith rather than the other way around. Our discussion also highlighted the significance of

vulnerability among believers and how young adults value transparency when addressing emotional challenges.

The session concluded with a brief reflection on how we rely on our faith to navigate tumultuous times in our lives. Although our conversation was short, I informed participants that session two would delve into this topic in greater detail and provide more opportunities to discuss the foundation of our faith. We ended the session with a closing prayer.

Session Two

Two new members were welcomed to the group. They introduced themselves and completed the Spiritual Fortitude Survey (SFS-9). The group noted that the statements on the SFS-9 were thought-provoking and believed their answers would change depending on their circumstances. Session two focused on faith and identifying ways to use that faith to endure challenging seasons.

We examined our focal scripture, James 1:2-4, in the NIV, AMP, and MSG translations. Our discussion highlighted how believers can consider trials as joy or gifts and how the pressures of life can reveal one's true faith. We also discussed the importance of allowing challenges to mature and develop one's faith. The group identified resources and strategies for overcoming adversity that they have used in the past, with the most frequently mentioned resources being the church, other church members, and family members.

We then read Hebrews 11:1, which defines faith as confidence in things hoped for and assurance about things not seen. I reiterated that faith is rooted in confidence about

God. Our discussion included the importance of exercising our faith when we navigate challenges. I presented the belief that trials, challenges, and adversities are all part of our human journey. However, faith invites Christians to endure these things with a focus on the eternal aspects of God. Therefore, our faith should impact circumstances, rather than our challenges negatively affecting our faith. I emphasized that actions and attitudes incompatible with our faith must be rooted out and addressed.

We explored multiple scriptures that referenced the attributes of God as holy, good, faithful, loving, righteous, and just. Scriptures are tools of the faith that Christians should use when navigating trials. Participants were encouraged to identify and save scriptures that speak to them personally for use during challenging times. They also agreed to find and meditate on at least two more scriptures that resonated with them and their desire to endure life well. The group identified prayer, connecting with other believers, and solitude as useful tools. I suggested to the group that God provides opportunities to develop our faith through challenges and recommended that participants approach trials and adversity as opportunities for growth rather than sources of frustration.

Finally, I shared with the group two books that we discussed during our last session: *The Night Is Normal* by Dr. Alicia Britt Chole and *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* by Peter Scazzero. Both books provide practical tools and advice for using our faith to address our feelings as we navigate our spiritual journey. I briefly discussed my belief that emotional health is a necessary component of Christian discipleship. We closed with the journal prompt for next week's session. After our session ended, I was

asked if a young adult nearing her due date could join and participate in the online sessions. I agreed and informed them that she is welcome to participate virtually.

Session Three

Two new participants joined us, so we began the session with introductions and a brief overview of the previous two lessons. We then reviewed the responses to last week's journal prompt. Each participant described their limiting or negative thought pattern and how it has impacted their ability to successfully navigate challenges. We acknowledged the need to first recognize when we have these thought patterns, and then I emphasized the importance of overcoming limiting beliefs and thought patterns through scripture, prayer, and conversations with trusted members of our village.

The discussion then transitioned into our focal text, James 1:2-4, and the significance of faith in enduring trials. I presented the book of James as a source of encouragement for the community of faith that instructs believers to maintain trust in God despite internal and external struggles. While James was written for the early church, we agreed that it offers relevant wisdom for contemporary Christians facing modern challenges.

The concept of spiritual endurance was then introduced. For James, Christians without spiritual endurance are ill-equipped for service to God. As such, James understood the need for a spiritual perspective to combat the tendency to misinterpret adversity. We discussed how spiritual endurance enables one to stay true to one's beliefs even during difficult times. Three strategies were presented for cultivating spiritual

endurance: immerse oneself in scriptures, pose the right questions, and maintain connections (with God and a faith community).

One participant bravely shared their family's history with mental health diagnoses and their resistance to treatment due to their religious beliefs. The importance of open conversations about mental health and faith, and how they can coexist, was discussed. There was a time when these topics were not openly addressed, and we were all grateful that thoughts about the intersection of faith and mental health have shifted in a positive direction. I reminded the group that spiritual fortitude and spiritual endurance is not about negating feelings but rather about nurturing faith.

Before closing, we examined the accomplishments and challenges of gymnast Rebeca Andrade, who endured multiple ACL tears yet persevered in pursuing her passion. As a result of her perseverance, she won several medals at the 2024 Paris Olympic Games and has become her country's most decorated gymnast. We spotlighted her discussion about faith and how it helped her withstand the difficulties of each injury. I concluded the session by providing the participants with their journal prompt for the next week.

Session Four

Week four began with a review and discussion of last week's journal homework assignment. Some felt the topic was a bit harder to answer and required more self-reflection. I reminded them that self-reflection is beneficial and a necessary part of our spiritual growth and maturity. We then transitioned into our topic for the week, spiritual enterprise, which is the second principle of Spiritual Fortitude. The researcher's definition

of spiritual enterprise was provided (maintaining one's integrity while navigating challenging times), which led to an in-depth conversation about integrity. Two definitions of integrity were given. The first is the ability to adhere to one's moral and ethical principles, allowing one's decisions and actions to be guided by a moral compass. We then explored the biblical understanding of integrity, which involves a sincere dedication to living life aligned with and surrendered to God's will.

The significance of maintaining your witness during hardships was also introduced, leading to a discussion on the tension between the desire to remain authentic and the need to preserve our witness as we navigate difficult situations. Sometimes, it can be challenging to balance being human and being a child of God. We examined the journeys of Joseph, Job, Daniel, Paul, Queen Esther, Ruth, Hannah, and Mary, emphasizing their resilience, obedience, and integrity despite the adversity they encountered. We also referenced James' concern for how believers navigate adversity. James advocated for, and we agreed that our disposition while enduring trials can impact and inspire those around us.

The group also discussed the challenges faced by young adults in dealing with uncharted territories and the need for guidance and structure. They emphasized the importance of being a child of God and seeking guidance from Him in navigating these challenges. For young adults, I thought it was important to emphasize the significance of grace and patience and to remind them that God's work is ongoing even for those of us who are older.

We then watched a video of Kirk Franklin from October 2024, where he expressed frustration with the tendency to present Christianity as a perfect, packaged

faith, despite the imperfections and difficulties described in the Bible. He emphasized the importance of acknowledging and sharing in the pain and struggles of others rather than trying to make everything appear neat and tidy. He highlighted the unfairness and unpredictability of life and the need to accept these aspects of human experience within the context of faith.

While his video received mixed feedback on his Instagram page, we appreciated his transparency and generally agreed with his argument that it is okay to let people lament and grieve when they need to. I shared with the group my philosophy regarding the importance of meeting people where they are emotionally, including the gesture of simply being present and listening rather than immediately quoting scripture. The group agreed that while scripture is important, there are times when practical help or a ministry of presence is more appropriate. The session ended with a homework journal question about the role of integrity in navigating future challenges.

Session Five

We began the session by reviewing the participants' responses to last week's journal prompt. All the participants felt that the prompt was challenging but helpful for self-reflection. We then welcomed our two panelists, Dr. Kelene J. Robinson (Dr. KJ) and Mrs. Jenifer Jones. Dr. KJ shared her experience of grief and recovery after losing her husband of nearly twenty years suddenly in 2021. She also shared how that experience motivated her to become a grief recovery specialist. She discussed how her faith was shaken during this time and how she had to revisit her core beliefs to make sense of her loss. Dr. KJ emphasized her belief that multiple truths can coexist and that

not all questions have answers. During her grief journey, she found it helpful to externalize her emotions through writing, talking, and physical release. She also stressed the importance of giving oneself grace during the grieving process. She closed her remarks by sharing her conviction that it would be a shame if she did not share what she has learned about grief with others.

Mrs. Jenifer Jones detailed her experience of losing her son, Jeremiah, to gun violence and how her faith has helped her endure. She emphasized the importance of trusting in God's Word and finding strength through scripture, particularly 1 Thessalonians 5:18, which encourages giving thanks in all circumstances. Mrs. Jones explained that she focuses on positive thoughts to counteract negative ones and believes that all things work together for good, as stated in Romans 8:28. Although no one has been arrested or held responsible for her son's murder, she maintains her faith, forgives those responsible, and prays for their salvation. Her journey for justice and her disposition while grieving are remarkable examples of spiritual endurance and fortitude. Like Dr. KJ, she desires to help others going through similar situations and mentioned her plans to start a group for couples dealing with grief.

Afterward, two participants shared their journeys with grief, both having lost their fathers. One participant openly shared that his relationship with his father was complicated and that he chose to forgive him, letting go of his resentment during his father’s final moments. I thanked the participant for sharing his story of navigating an intensely painful moment and noted how his sensitivity to the Holy Spirit allowed him to showcase spiritual enterprise and operate in integrity, despite the opportunity to be vengeful.

Another group member shared his experiences with integrity, particularly in times of adversity, and how he strives to be a man of God. He also expressed his struggles with personal battles and the need for improvement in his relationship with God. I connected his struggle to James' desire for believers to align their actions with their professed beliefs, especially during challenging times. Before concluding the session, I presented the final journal prompt, which asked the group to reflect on our time together studying Spiritual Fortitude and to share their thoughts and feelings about whether the discussions and lessons had changed their perspective on adversity.

Session Six

I began the session by showing the Bible Project's summary video on the book of James. The video highlights James' connection to Jesus as his half-brother and his role in the early church. It explained how James' teachings are influenced by Jesus' teachings and focused on living according to Jesus' summary of the Torah. We then discussed the relevance of James' teachings to current challenges, particularly regarding wealth, social status, and caring for others.

Afterwards, we reviewed the importance of spiritual maturity and endurance when facing trials and challenges. I presented James' perspective that we need to consider these experiences as gifts from God, which can lead to spiritual growth and maturity. I also highlighted the role of the Black Church in our survival and ability to endure challenging times and the significant role our faith has played throughout the generations. Like James, I encouraged the participants to lean into their faith and persevere, using their spiritual toolkit to endure trials.

The group discussed the challenges of spiritual fortitude and the need to trust God's heart when we do not understand His hand. They also shared personal experiences of enduring and persevering, emphasizing the importance of faith and trust in God's plan. Each participant identified anchoring scriptures and spiritual resources that they could use when facing various challenges. Participants shared their chosen scriptures and tools, stressing the importance of faith, trust, and obedience in times of adversity. The group also discussed the value of journaling, meditating on scriptures, and seeking wise counsel. The conversation ended with a reflection on how to cultivate spiritual fortitude, emphasizing the need to trust God's heart even when His hand does not make sense.

For our final task, I asked participants to complete the Spiritual Fortitude Survey. Once completed, I gave each participant a sticker featuring our focal text from James. I expressed my sincere gratitude for their attendance before concluding our final session with a prayer of thanksgiving and encouragement.

Summary of Learning

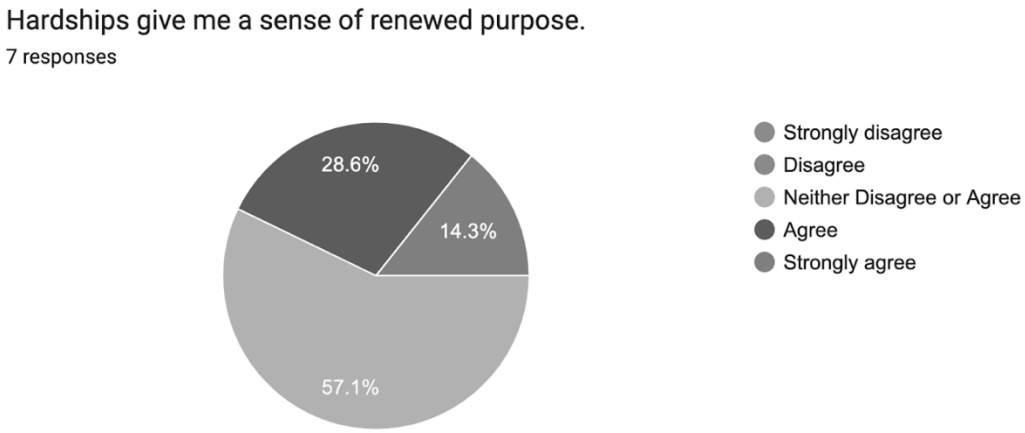
Requiring participants to sign the consent forms weeks before the project began was a challenge. Twelve individuals responded to recruitment emails from their Ministry leader and expressed interest in the project. Multiple emails were sent containing details about the recruitment table, my availability to answer questions, and the need for a signed informed consent form before the start of the first session. Despite these efforts, only one of the young adults signed the consent form prior to the project sessions. The remaining six participants signed their forms on the first day they attended the session. Although

obtaining signed consent forms was challenging, I successfully met the projected number of participants for my small group.

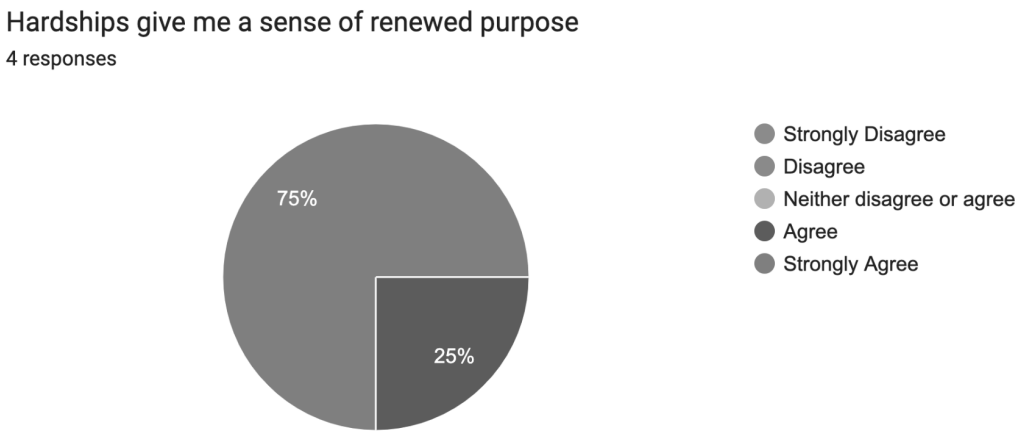
Spiritual Fortitude Survey (SFS-9)

Seven participants completed the Spiritual Fortitude Survey (SFS-9) as a pre-test during their first session. The average pre-test score for the participants was 4.06. Four participants attended all six sessions and took the SFS-9 as a post-test during the final session. Their average overall score was 4.53. While individual responses to the pre- and post-test could not be linked, the increase in the median Spiritual Fortitude Score of the four participants indicates movement in the anticipated direction. This trend towards increased spiritual fortitude suggests that the content of the sessions may have influenced the increase, but this cannot be stated with certainty due to the anonymous responses. In the future, I recommend linking participants' pre- and post-test submissions so that changes in a participant's spiritual fortitude scale score can be more easily identified and attributed to content exposure. Despite the challenge of not being able to link individual responses, changes were observed in the following SFS-9 responses:

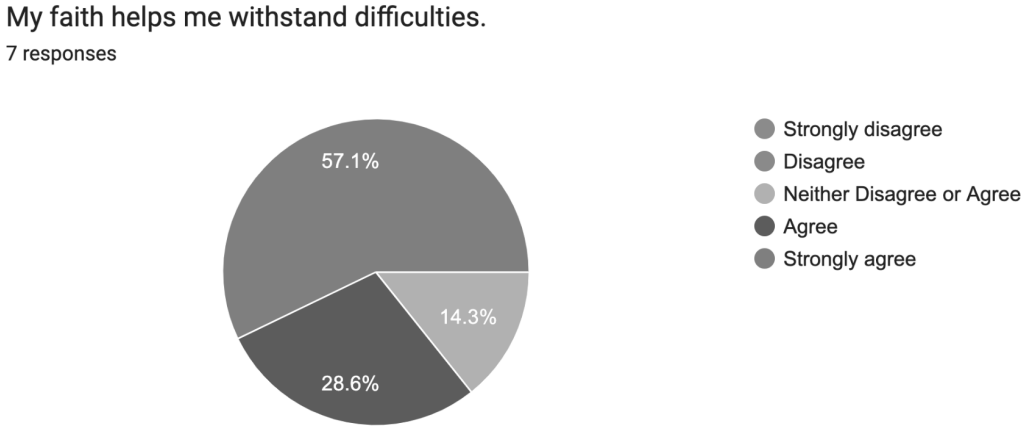
SFS-9 Question Three, Pre-Test:



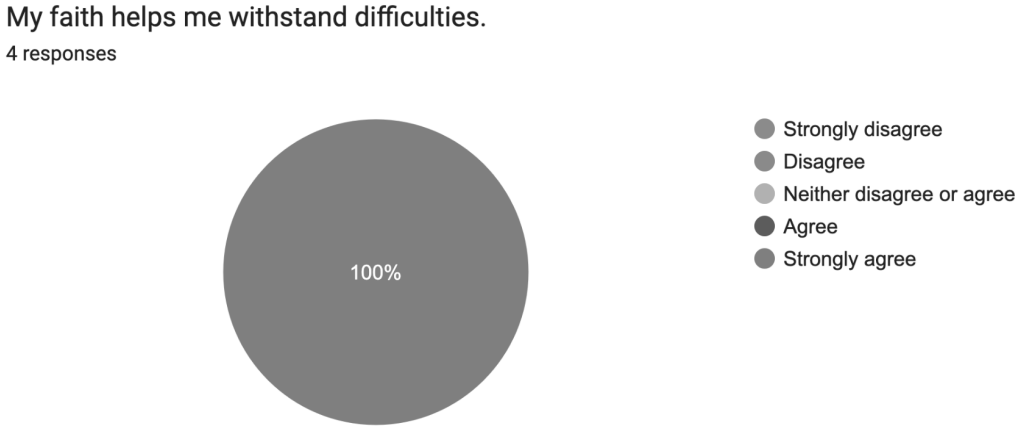
Question Three, Post-Test:



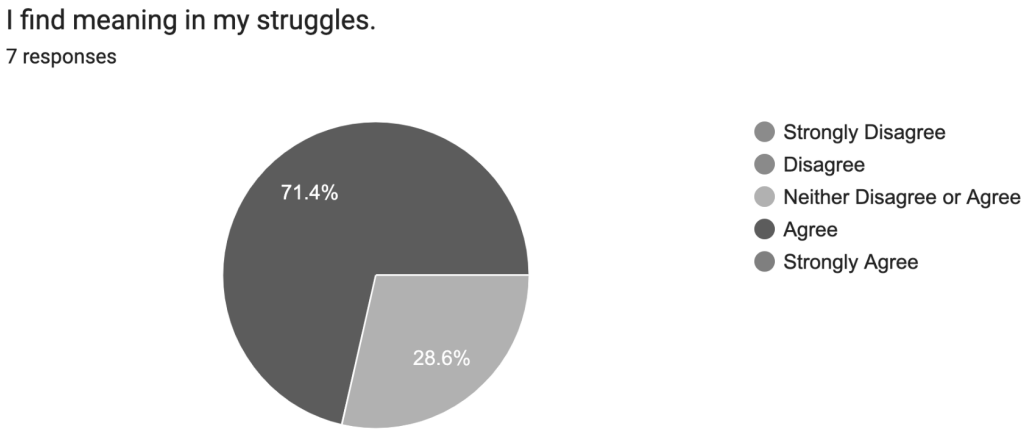
SFS-9 Question Seven, Pre-Test:



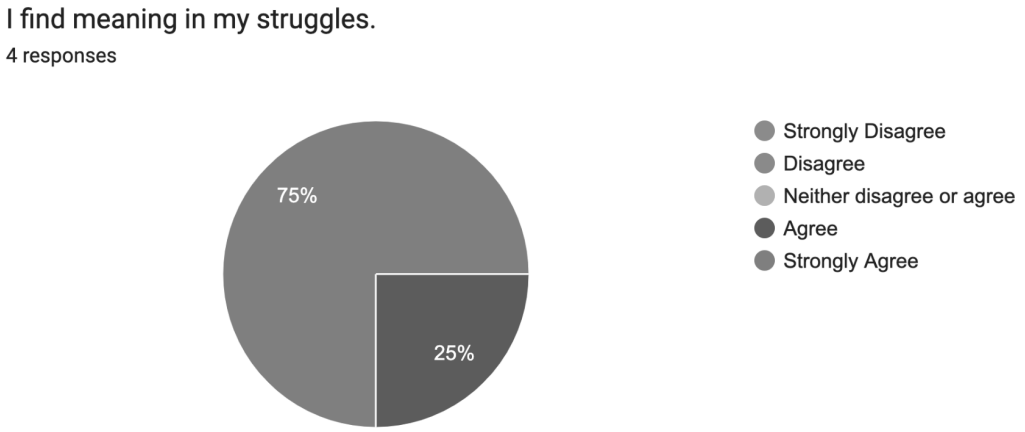
Question Seven, Post-Test:



SFS-9 Question Nine, Pre-Test:



Question Nine, Post-Test:



While the shifts cannot be directly linked to any particular participant, the four participants who attended all six sessions provided positive feedback about finding meaning in struggles, using their faith to withstand difficulties, and discovering purpose in hardship.

Journal Themes:

Five of the seven participants returned their journals to me for review. When asked to identify a challenging time or adversity they experienced in the past, the journal entries included experiencing "intrusive thoughts/feelings" regarding previous failures and "feeling lost sometimes." Three participants wrote about "broken and failed relationships."

When participants were asked which resources they used to overcome previous challenges, each identified their family and church community as important sources of support. Individual journal entries included: "When I hit rock bottom, I knew the only thing that would and could help was God and to find a community that would accept me and my child…The Mount is that resource for me." "The best resource I've ever been granted with was/is my church." "I leaned on family to overcome problems in the past." "The Church itself is the best resource I've used."

Participants were asked to write about thought patterns or limiting beliefs that they felt negatively impacted how they managed challenges in the past. Their responses included: "I have been experiencing internal struggles with imposter syndrome," "I feel lost sometimes," "I tend to always think about the worst-case scenario for everything," "My struggles put me in a constant state of worry," and "my emotions and pride tend to take over me."

When asked how they manage their thoughts and emotions when dealing with adversity, one participant wrote that in the past, they have "mismanaged this and have missed many opportunities for growth," but went on to say that the sessions have "reminded me to allow my faith to impact my feelings, not the other way around."

Another participant wrote that before our session, they viewed "every failed relationship and career prospect as a burden only I can bear." However, the series taught them that "God is with me each step of the way. With every failure and rejection, I need to not only rely on him to get me through those challenging moments but to also acknowledge his hand in my life." A third participant described "hardly ever expressing myself or my feelings to people, as I don't think they have the capacity to deal with it." Yet, they went on to write that "Trusting God's heart, even when I can't see His hand, is a new approach that I will forever put forward in my life." While expressing a desire to keep things inside, this same participant ended their journal entries by identifying the church and "a community of like-minded believers" as a resource that they could rely on.

Finally, when asked about the impact of the sessions, participants' comments included: "These sessions were timely, humbling is also another word that comes to mind. I'm in a better space to embrace challenges." "In the past, I tended to view challenging situations as a battle only I could fight. I now practice integrity by putting my full faith in God when I face difficult situations and decisions." "...Now I want to become mature in my thinking/ways to become a well-developed disciple." My greatest joy was seeing one participant write in their journal that our sessions were "a safe space," and another wrote that moving forward, they plan to "use the Word to help me endure with integrity."

One week after our sessions ended, I asked all participants to complete a three-question survey that included: whether they would recommend the series to other participants; their reasons for recommending or not recommending the classes; and a space for any additional comments or feedback they wanted to share. All participants

responded that they would recommend the series to other young adults. One respondent wrote that the series was a "great space for young adults to connect and learn practical wisdom." Another participant wrote that they would recommend the series because it "encouraged me to open up about my own personal life experiences regarding my faith and was very supportive in helping me face my challenges."

Participant journal writings, responses to the Spiritual Fortitude Survey, and group discussions all support the problem statement that young adults are indeed experiencing adversity and challenges that, at times, leave them feeling discouraged and spiritually disconnected. Their overall feedback after participating in the spiritual fortitude small group sessions confirms my belief that teaching practical skills for cultivating spiritual fortitude normalizes the experience of trials and adversity and combats their negative view of challenges on their faith journey. One participant said it best: "Before this, I would just thug it out when I was facing challenges, now I feel like I can do something different."

Conclusion

In her book, *The Night Is Normal*, Dr. Alicia Britt Chole argues that trying times, which she describes as "the night," are among the wisest mentors in the Christian journey. With that in mind, in a Facebook post in July 2024, she encourages believers to "Never let the presence of a storm cause you to doubt the presence of God. The storm answers to him! Trust God."[2] Throughout her book, Dr. Chole invites Christians not to stumble, become overly concerned, or become disillusioned by adversity and spiritual

[2] Alicia Britt Chole, July 1, 2024 Facebook post.

pain. Instead, she posits that an individual's feelings may not align with their faith, but they can still find comfort in the fact that their faith is not based on feelings. "Faith is more like a muscle. Muscles grow as we exercise them, and they don't always feel good."[3]

Sadly, the need to flex our faith muscles has increased as the political and social climate of the new administration has unleashed escalating levels of discrimination, attacks, and challenges against poor, marginalized, and historically disadvantaged communities. I assert that strategic leadership for Black congregations must include retelling how the Black Church has its nexus in supporting the emotional, social, and spiritual well-being of its members as well as the greater community.

Enduring adversity and challenging times is not a new occurrence for African Americans. However, the intensity and tone of these turbulent times in our nation is a novel experience for many young adults. During one of our sessions, one young adult lamented that she was anxious because she was living through "uncharted territory" and she expressed that she was struggling to endure challenges she never thought she would have to face in her lifetime. Now more than ever, church leadership should feel compelled to incorporate conversations about effective strategies for cultivating spiritual fortitude as a viable way to navigate today's challenges and adversities.

While adversity, hardships, and unexpected circumstances are inevitable parts of the human experience, navigating these difficulties alone can be daunting and overwhelming. Moreover, if not managed properly, isolation can lead to feelings of spiritual disorientation or even divine abandonment. Therefore, creating safe spaces and

[3]Alicia Britt Chole, Doctoral Intensive Lecture, January 30, 2025.

sacred communities for Young Adult Christians to openly share their challenges can be a crucial element of their spiritual development. Young Adult Christians without a community of care may find themselves wondering whether God sees their situation, hears their prayers, or cares about their pain. Cultivating spiritual fortitude in young adults can help develop a persistent faith that enables them to endure life's challenges effectively.

Conducting small group sessions that foster genuine fellowship and connection reinforced my belief that ongoing discussions about the role of spiritual fortitude in confronting life's challenges (especially for young adults) are truly necessary. Participants in this project expressed appreciation for the authentic community and support that developed during our six weeks together. Several participants voiced a desire for the conversations to continue. One participant stated that she was crafting a proposal to present to our Pastor for bi-weekly Bible Study sessions on spiritual fortitude and similar topics. She hopes for more opportunities to gather with her peers to learn and engage with topics of faith.

Why Spiritual Fortitude?

Research has found that people often struggle emotionally and spiritually when faced with adversity, particularly unexpected circumstances. While a proper theological perspective will not eliminate life's challenges, it can keep Christians encouraged and provide the hope needed to endure their situations with patience and perseverance. The social sciences have frequently highlighted resilience as an essential trait necessary to successfully withstand hardships. The goal of resilience is to "bounce back" from

adversity and regain a sense of normalcy. Spiritual fortitude is similar to resilience; however, spiritual fortitude offers a path forward for believers, regardless of the chance to return to an old way of being.

After a personal journey with cancer, researcher Jamie Aten sought a more robust biblical counterpart to the concept of resilience. Aten had studied resilience for many years and understood its importance for tackling adversity and hardships. However, the researcher believed there was a need for more research and discussion on how faith impacts individuals navigating life-altering situations. Aten joined a team of researchers who coined the term "Spiritual Fortitude" and defined it as "a character trait enabling people to endure and make redemptive meaning from adversity through their sacred connections with God, others, and themselves."[4] Spiritual Fortitude is an essential part of spiritual formation that invites believers to lean into their faith and dig deeper when life's circumstances disrupt the rhythms of life. It is about enduring well. Endurance has long been linked to hope and is believed to help believers hold on when life brings unexpected twists and trials. Essentially, Spiritual Fortitude invites believers to declare: We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed (2 Cor. 4:8,9).

Future Implications

While this project focused on a small group context, it is possible that a larger number of participants would engage in a one-time event like a conference or retreat. I

[4] D. R. Tongeren, J. D. Aten, S. McElroy, D. E. Davis, L. Shannonhouse, E. B. Davis, and J. N. Hook, "Development and Validation of a Measure of Spiritual Fortitude," in *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 11, no. 6 (2019): 588.

believe that the six-week commitment hindered many who initially expressed interest, so a one-time or quarterly event may work better for this age group. Additionally, recruitment for this project began one month before the start of the first session. Initially, twelve individuals expressed verbal interest in participating. I suspect that waiting four weeks for sessions to begin decreased the interest or desire of certain individuals to participate. A quicker turnaround—two to three weeks from sign-up to the start of sessions—may meet their immediate need and interest.

In the future, reaching out to those who expressed interest but did not begin the sessions may also generate insights into the challenges facing young adults. Was the need for a consent form an issue? Did the in-person format a challenge? Was the date or location a hindrance? Were they interested in receiving the information from a different person (i.e., the pastor)? The feedback from those initially interested but ultimately did not participate can help design more suitable sessions for future participants.

In closing, I remain convinced that God's church is the ideal place for believers facing life's challenges to cultivate spiritual fortitude and create soul-affirming connections with God and fellow believers. Indeed, the good news for Christians is that we do not have to overcome adversity and challenges alone. For we serve a mighty God and are connected to a body of believers that share an enduring faith and trust in God's ability to guide us through anything.

> We've come this far by faith
> Leaning on the Lord
> Trusting in His Holy Word
> He's never failed me yet
> Oh! can't turn around
> We've Come This Far By Faith.[5]

[5] Albert A. Goodson, *We've Come This Far By Faith,* 1956.

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